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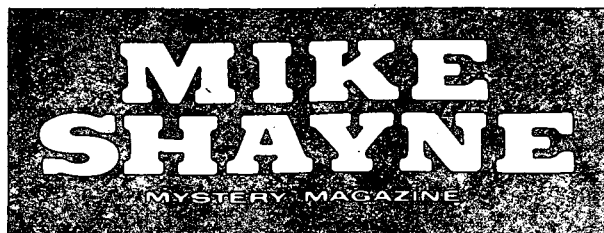
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APRIL, 1963

Vol. 12, No. 5

A COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL

DEATH WAITS IN THE DARKROOM

by KELLY ROOS

Wealthy Mrs. Fleming was displayed with proper regularity on the society pages of every newspaper in New York. Now—with the silver carving knife sticking out of the back of her neck—she made the front page.

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DETOUR TO MURDER

The bus with the empty driver's seat went plunging off the road. And Shayne insisted on staying around to help catch a fiend who would kill children to cover a murder!

by BRETT HALLIDAY

MICHAEL SHAYNE sat unruffled in the Palm Manor Police Station while Lieutenant Bob Edwards stared at him. The State Policeman's mouth was open and angry as Edwards said, "Are you crazy, Mike? Why should I run an autopsy on an accident victim?"

"Because I don't think it was an accident," Shayne said. "When I

saw that bus go off the road there was no driver."

"We found him in the wreck, Mike."

"He was dead before the bus crashed," Shayne insisted. "I'll stake my reputation on it."

"Maybe he had a heart attack," Edwards said.

"Was he in bad health?"

© 1963, by Brett Halliday

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET



Shayne said. "He was a pretty young man, wasn't he?"

"All right," Edwards admitted. "But I think you just forgot what you saw, Mike. He was behind that wheel."

"I didn't forget what I saw," Shayne said.

It was not something Shayne would easily forget. He had been driving south on his way back to Miami from a case up north when the school bus had careened across the highway directly into his path. An endless split second as the bus bore down on him with its empty driver's seat and the faces of children screaming at the windows. A bus filled with hysterical and doomed children, and in that instant he had turned out of its way, it had passed him, and it had plunged over the edge of the highway into the trees.

After that Shayne had been too busy pulling the dead and injured children from the wreck to think about the empty driver's seat until he saw the body of the driver. Now, in the borrowed office of the Police Station, Shayne said, "I've seen that color on a body before, Bob. The lips were blue, the skin had a blue tinge. He was crushed badly, I agree, but I saw that blue color of his lips and skin, and I'll bet my next ten fees that it's cyanide poisoning."

"A heart attack victim can have blueish lips, Mike," Edwards said.

"Agreed," Shayne said, "but

don't you think you should be sure?"

Edwards nodded, "Okay, Mike. And maybe you better hang around. You were the first one on the scene, we'll need you. Stay in town a day or two."

Shayne stood up. "I'll be waiting in the Holiday Motel." As he started to walk out of the office, he said, "How are the kids?"

"Four dead, six critical, twelve not so good."

"You know, Bob," Shayne said, "if I'm right, if it was murder, this one murderer I'd like to help catch. All those poor kids."

"I'll call you when I get the report," Edwards said.

Shayne walked out into the wide main street of Palm Manor. In the bright sun of the small town he remembered he was supposed to be in Miami to start an important case with a big fee. But that could wait. Edwards wanted him to stay around, and he wanted to stay around. He wanted to help catch a killer who would kill children just to cover a murder.

He crossed the street and went into a Tavern to call Lucy Hamilton. The voice of his pert secretary was worried until Shayne explained why he was late. "Tell the client I'll have to start late on his case. He can go to another detective if he can't wait."

"I will, Michael," the sympathetic voice of his brown-eyed secretary said. "All those children!

He must be a monster, that killer up there."

"If it's murder," Shayne said. "I'll call in every day to let you know."

He hung up and walked to the bar. He sat down and ordered a sidecar. The bar stool creaked under the weight of his bony frame. He wanted the sidecar to dull the sound of those children screaming. He could still hear them. He was on his second sidecar when the man walked in, and sat down next to Shayne.

A tall, cadaverous man who introduced himself to Shayne as John Mancuso. "I edit the local newspaper. It's a weekly, but I try to cover all the news. Word got out that you were in town, Shayne. That's news, a big detective like you."

"You move fast," Shayne said. "But I'm just passing through."

"I didn't always work on a hick town paper," Mancuso said. "I get around, and I understand you're interested in that bus accident. Why should a big-time detective like you be interested in a bus accident?"

"Who said I was, Mancuso?" Shayne said.

"The desk sergeant, I pay him to tip me about things," the editor said. "Come on, Shayne, gimme a break."

"It's nothing mysterious," Shayne explained. "I was almost run down by the bus, Edwards



needs me at the inquest. I was the first one on the scene. I helped with the dead and injured."

Mancuso seemed startled. "You were there—on the highway? Edwards didn't tell me that. Anything else Edwards didn't tell me?"

"Sorry, Mancuso, you'll have to ask him, I'm just a witness," Shayne said. "What can you tell me about the school that owned the bus?"

"Nothing much," Mancuso said. "It's a private school, nice and quiet. It has boys six to fourteen, the principal owns the place, they could use money but they get along. Davis, that was the name of the driver, Mack Davis, was

sports instructor. He doubled in brass as driver."

"What do you know about Davis?" Shayne said.

"Not much, he was new here this year," Mancuso said. "No wife, no girl friends, no scandals, no bad habits like drinking or smoking. He was a good athlete and a nice guy, I heard. I didn't know him well myself. Why? What about Davis? Is there something fishy about him?"

"I really don't know, Mancuso," Shayne said. "Maybe Edwards could tell you more, it's his case, you know." Shayne thought a moment, and said, "Do you know if Davis was sick?"

Mancuso shook his head. "Perfect health as far as I know, Shayne. Why, you think he had an attack of something, lost control of the bus?"

"It could be that way," Shayne said. "You better talk to Edwards."

"Thanks, Shayne, I will," Mancuso said.

The tall, thin man left the tavern. A few minutes later Shayne paid and left. He was tired from his long drive, and the strain of the accident, and there was nothing he could do now but wait.

He drove to the Holiday Motel after buying a bottle of Martel, and when he was nearly to the motel he was suddenly conscious of a feeling of being followed. When he slowed and watched in

his rear-view mirror, he saw nothing very suspicious. But the feeling stayed with him all the way to the motel and into his room.

He stood behind the window curtain watching, but no cars turned into the motel driveway, or even slowed, and if he was being followed it was by a real professional. He shrugged, and went to pour himself four fingers of Martel. Then he lay down to rest and think, the cognac beside him on the bed table.

II

THE RINGING OF the telephone awakened Mike Shayne. Groggy, he realized he had dozed off. As he reached for the telephone beside the bed he noticed that the sun was going down outside the room. He had slept for some hours.

Edwards was on the telephone. The Lieutenant was serious and short. "Enough cyanide to kill a horse. You were right."

"Then it's murder," Shayne said.

"Looks that way, Mike."

Shayne said, "I'd like to work with you, Bob, okay?"

"Well," Bob-Edwards hesitated. "Well, okay, Mike, we'll need you at the inquest anyway. Come on down and we'll go over the details. Just keep it quiet and don't get in the way, okay? My chief doesn't like private detectives too much."

"Thanks, Bob, I'll be discreet," Shayne said.

"I mean it, Mike," Edwards said over the phone. "You already told Mancuso too much. He's been chasing me. I had to tell him about the autopsy, he's got an in around here. I didn't tell him about the cyanide. I said we just ran a check for heart trouble, but the autopsy's enough for him to start making trouble with headlines. He used to work in Chicago and likes headlines. His sheet comes out day after tomorrow."

"Sorry, Bob, I'll be more careful," Shayne said.

After he hung up, Shayne shaved, dressed, and was ready to leave the room when he heard the noise. A faint shuffle outside his door as if someone were listening outside. Shayne stepped quickly across the room.

He took hold of the door handle, waited a second, and flung open the door. There was no one there.

In a brief flash he thought he saw a figure vanish behind a building across the highway. Shayne sprinted across the road. As he reached the building across the road a car roared away from behind the building and vanished down the highway.

When he returned to his motel cottage he saw, in the soft dirt of the garden, a man's footprint. The footprint of a man who wore narrow, pointed shoes. And yet the

detective would have sworn that the figure he had seen vanish across the road had been a woman.

When Shayne reached the Station House, he filled Edwards in on the people he was sure were tailing him. By the time he had finished it was dark outside the office. Edwards switched on the light on the desk.

"Murder without motive, and shadows following you," Edwards said.

"I'm not sure, Bob. If anyone is tailing me it's a pro. What I don't get is who knows I'm even here?"

"Mancuso could have told half the people of Florida," Edwards said. "Okay, the local boys are out checking the principal, old Hopewell, and the other teachers. Sam Petrie from the Sheriff's office is tracing the poison, if it was bought here, which I doubt. One thing, Mike, the killer knew Davis' habits.

"Autopsy showed he got the dose in a bar of almond candy. He ate a bar every morning on the bus. A habit, you know? That makes it look local, to know about the habit."

Shayne's grey eyes looked thoughtful, and the redheaded detective rubbed at his bushy eyebrows. "Unless he brought the habit with him."

"It's a funny habit."

"He was sports instructor,"

Shayne said, tugging now on his left earlobe as he thought. "Candy is energy, you know, Bob? If he was sports instructor he must have been some kind of athlete. What was his sport?"

"Who knows?" Edwards said. The State Police Lieutenant picked up a folder from the desk. "Here's his record from the school. Showed up about a year ago. No references, but old man Hopewell, that's the principal, decided to take a chance. The school hasn't been doing too well, couldn't pay much. Davis said he had experience in," and Edwards looked down to read the folder, "boxing, swimming, a little wrestling, some semi-pro ball.

"Hopewell says Davis turned out fine, really knew his sports and handled the kids well. Davis didn't claim to have any education to speak of. Minded his own business. No girl friends, no friends, no enemies in town, no trouble, no bad habits."

"So Mancuso told me," Shayne said. "It sounds wrong, Bob, like a man hiding."

"I thought of that," Edwards said. "I tried to get a picture of Davis, but no go. The school didn't have a picture, not even in a group."

"Camera shy," Shayne said.

"Looks that way."

"How about prints, marks on the body?"

Edwards shook his head. "Too

mangled. The bus burned some. The body was burned pretty bad."

"It's got to be in his past, Bob," Shayne said.

"What?"

"The motive," Shayne said. "No other habits, Bob, anything?"

The State Police Lieutenant thought for a moment in the dim light of the office. Outside the traffic was going past on its way up and down the Florida coast. "Nothing, Mike."

Shayne stood up. "I think I'd like to check Davis' room."

"Go ahead, Mike, but keep out of our way, okay?"

III

IN HIS CAR Shayne drove through the town to the north. The highway was dark all the way to the narrow road that led off to the left and up a small hill to the school grounds. The instructors and teachers lived in small cottages on the grounds.

Davis' cottage was the fourth from the left. All the cottages were dark because the other teachers were being quizzed somewhere in the school by the local police.

Shayne left his car and walked across the grassy ground toward Davis' cottage. Later, he realized that he had been aware of a darker shadow in the night. A large shadow hidden under the trees near the cottages and not far from the road.

And, later, he realized that the dark shadow was a car, and that what he stumbled over at that instant were the ruts of tire tracks in the soft dirt that led up to the hidden car. The tire tracks saved his life.

The shots came from the looming shadow. Two shots in quick succession, and even as he stumbled, heard the shots, and went down, Shayne's mind told him that the shots were from a long-barrelled .38. It was strange the things that went through a man's mind in an instant like that. Shots, a stumble, on his face, and then, the thought that it was a special .38, and the sound of a car motor racing, a car pulling away.

Shayne was on his feet and running. But the car roared out onto the road and vanished into the trees back toward the highway. And one thing was certain, the car had not followed him, it had been waiting there.

Shayne dusted himself off and continued on to the cottage. He went in and switched on the light. Then, with a sudden thought, the detective touched the bulb. It was still warm. Someone had been in the cottage only a few minutes ago, and Shayne guessed it had been his unknown assailant. He began to search.

After twenty minutes he gave up. The cottage contained nothing of interest. He was about to leave when his eye was caught by a flash



of dull red in the corner. When he picked it up he saw it was a rubber ball. And beside the ball he found a piece of wood.

A dark, semi-polished piece of wood. The wood was cut in the shape of a narrow ruler, the edges squared off. It was about two inches long and a half-inch wide.

Shayne was about to drop the piece of wood, it did not seem important, when he looked at it more closely. Just a piece of wood, that is what the police must have thought, and he had thought the same thing at first, but now he looked at it more closely. It was smooth, polished, and, he realized, must have been manufactured. It was not just a piece of wood. Shayne had the idea that this was a very special piece of wood. He put it into his pocket.

The piece of wood was something he would have to show Edwards. He turned to leave when he

became aware of the rubber ball still in his hand. And became aware that he was squeezing the rubber ball. He looked down at his hand. He crossed the room to the telephone. He told the operator to get him Tim Rourke in Miami.

The familiar voice of his reporter friend came on the line. Shayne filled Rourke in on the case. The lean reporter listened to the details, and then Shayne said, "I've got a hunch about Davis, Tim.

"Check your files, the wire services, for any item on a missing boxer. Probably a professional but not too famous. Someone just famous enough to have to change his name to hide."

"Okay, Mike, it might take a while."

"As fast as you can, Tim," Shayne said. "Our killer may move."

"Soon as possible tomorrow, you'll hear from me," Tim Rourke said.

After Rourke hung up, Shayne called Bob Edwards and told the Lieutenant about the attempt to shoot him. Edwards suggested a stake-out at Davis' cottage and at Shayne's motel. The redhead agreed. Then he went out to his car and drove swiftly back to his motel.

Shayne went to sleep with his gun within easy reach. The killer would probably try again.

IV

IN THE MOTEL dining room Mike Shayne ate his breakfast slowly. He had already tried to call Edwards, but the Lieutenant was out somewhere. Shayne felt almost helpless, the case moving too slowly, and he had to be in Miami soon or he'd be out of clients.

He was finishing his coffee when Mancuso, the editor, walked into the dining room. The editor was excited.

"Shayne, I want some facts! Edwards won't tell me a thing. Come on, you can help me."

"Edwards is running the case, Mancuso," Shayne said.

Mancuso protested. "This is murder, Shayne! I got that much from Edwards. I print tomorrow. I have a right to know what the police know. You can't muzzle the press, Shayne."

"You used to work in Chicago, right?" Shayne said. "I guess this isn't Chicago, the police don't cater to reporters so much."

Mancuso sat down. "Why would anyone murder Davis?" the editor pleaded. "Do you have a motive? Are there any clues? Shayne, that murderer may still be here! I want to warn my readers."

"I'm just a witness, Mancuso," Shayne said.

"Listen, Shayne, I have to set type for my first edition in a few hours. Now I want to know—"

Shayne froze with his coffee cup in the air. He turned to look at Mancuso.

"What kind of gun do you carry, Mancuso?" he asked.

"Now listen, I want—"

"I can find out easy," Shayne said. "You'd have a permit."

Mancuso seemed to shrug. "Okay. It's a thirty-eight, and I have a permit."

"Long-barreled thirty-eight?" Shayne asked.

"That's what most of us have up here, good for target or small game if you're inclined that way. I just keep mine in the car for protection."

Shayne walked from the table and went to his coat. He took the piece of wood from his pocket and showed it to Mancuso.

"You said 'set type' and I remembered," the detective said. "This is furniture, wood strips for locking up type in a page form, right?"

Mancuso nodded. "Okay, so it's from a print shop."

"I found it in Davis' cottage. I'll take a bet it has your prints on it," Shayne said.

"Okay," Mancuso said, "I carry a lot of that stuff, everyone around a print shop does, it's a habit we acquire. And I visited Davis, he was sports teacher, I covered the sports at the school. Anything else?"

"You wouldn't have visited him last night?"

"He was dead last night," Mancuso said.

"Yeh, I know," Shayne said. "Maybe you were after something?"

"I was out on a story," Mancuso said. "Ask them at the school. I was listening to our fine police get nowhere with those other teachers."

"I'll bet you were," Shayne said.

"Anything else?" Mancuso said.

"What happened to all your questions?"

"From you I'll get nothing," Mancuso said. "I'll chase the police a while."

After the editor had left, Mike Shayne decided to visit the dead man's cottage again. Somewhere there was a motive, and another look at the cottage in the light of day might turn up something of value.

All the way out to the school in his car, Shayne thought about Mancuso. The editor was mean enough, he was sure of that, and he knew Davis and the dead man's habits. But why? As far as Shayne could see there was no motive. The editor didn't even know who Davis really was. If Davis was anything more than he seemed.

He parked in the same spot and walked to the cottage. Nothing happened this time. Nothing until Shayne walked into the cottage. It looked like a hurricane had hit



the room. A hurricane without a name.

Everything was torn open, the rug rolled back, all the furniture thrown over. Whoever it was had been in a hurry. Because Edwards would have had a guard on the place since the attempt to shoot Shayne last night.

Shayne found the guard knocked out cold in the bushes behind the cottage. At least the guard had been knocked out, now the guard was awake and kicking against the torn sheets that bound him. Shayne freed the irate policeman.

"Who was it?" Shayne asked when the policeman was on his feet and calmed down.

"Beats me, Mr. Shayne," the

policeman said. "Except, well, I'd swear it was a woman."

"A woman?"

"Yep," the cop said. "I heard this noise, I got about half way around and it hit me. But I'll take an oath I saw a skirt and some long hair, blonde, too. It sure was a woman."

The mysterious female again. Or was it only a good disguise? Shayne pondered this after the policeman had gone to call in and explain the blow to his head and his pride. The redhead went back into the wrecked room. Someone had certainly been looking for something this time.

A thorough search yielded nothing until Shayne crawled on his hands and knees and found the loose floorboard. He lifted the board out. There was a small hole under the board. An empty hole. In the hole he found a woman's hairpin. A hairpin for blonde hair.

That was all Shayne had time to see. That and a pair of small, pointed black shoes, slim dark trousers, and the bottom edge of a dark blue overcoat. The owner of those shoes stopped Shayne from seeing anything else with what the detective decided later was the butt end of a .45—wielded by a practised hand.

And he felt, before it all went black, the expert searching of a quick pair of small hands all over his body below his aching head.

V

MICHAEL SHAYNE'S head still ached when he walked into the Palm Manor Police Station. In Lieutenant Edwards' office he found the Lieutenant and a tall, fat man who looked scared. Edwards looked up.

"You're late, Mike," Edwards said. "It looks like we've got our killer. Meet Mr. Hopewell, principal and murderer."

The tall, fat man protested. "I swear to you Lieutenant, I didn't kill him!"

Edwards said to Shayne, "Sam Petrie got to tracking down the poison, remember? Well he came up with an order sent out by old Doc Hopewell here, it went to a chemical company in New York, one item was five hundred grams of sodium cyanide."

"For the laboratory, Lieutenant," Hopewell cried. The big, fat man was sweating. "We use it in the laboratory."

Edwards went on, "So Sam checked real close on the Doc. Seems he's been seen hanging around Davis' cottage for over a week, four teachers saw him. He knew all about Davis eating candy every morning on the bus, and we checked his movements that morning. He told everyone he was sick and couldn't show, but some kids saw him down by the bus talking to Davis just before they took off for school!"

"All right, I talked to Davis, but I didn't kill him! Why would I kill him, what motive could I have!" Hopewell was desperate, and as Shayne listened he was sure the old man was lying. Not about the murder, maybe, but about something. He had a shrewd feeling that Hopewell knew more about Davis than he was telling.

Shayne said, "I don't know, Bob," and he told Edwards about the attack on him, the clubbing of the cop. Edwards listened carefully.

"You say you were out about twenty minutes?" Edwards said. "And you had to come in from the school? Well, that fits. Petrie had to wait around about a half an hour for Hopewell to show in his office. Sam only brought him in a few minutes ago. Hopewell could have been down at the cottage to slug you, and then made it back to his office where Sam got him."

Shayne looked at Hopewell's feet. "Wrong shoes, Bob."

"So he changed his shoes."

"Motive?" Shayne wanted to know.

"We'll find the motive," Edwards said grimly.

Shayne stood up. "Maybe, Bob, but I think I'll look around for a small stranger who wears pointed shoes and a tight blue overcoat with a bulge. Whoever hit me was a real pro, Bob, I'll

bet on it. And it was a pro who tailed me."

"Suit yourself, Mike. I think you're wasting your time."

For the rest of the morning Shayne checked motels, hotels and rooming houses. He found what he was looking for at the fourth motel on his list. A small man who always wore a buttoned topcoat even in Florida was registered. The small man had been there for three days under the name of Mr. Smith. From the description of the desk clerk Shayne was sure it was the man who had knocked him out.

But Shayne wanted to know more before he accused the very-professional-sounding Mr. Smith. It was time to check with Tim Rourke. He went to the nearest telephone booth in the motel lobby and called Rourke. The lean reporter had been trying to get him.

"Here it is, Mike," the reporter's voice said. "There were three missing fighters in the last year or so. They found one of them in the river in Chicago, the second one turned up in a psycho ward in L.A., the third's still missing."

"Tell me about the third one," Shayne said.

Rourke's voice reeled off the story. "Name is Dave McNamara, fought out of Chicago, middleweight, unranked. There were three newspaper stories on him. He was a main eventer, known as

a spoiler. Well, about a year ago he had a tough fight with an up-and-coming boy. He was even-money in the fight, three to one against being knocked out. He was that kind of tough fighter, never knocked out, you know?

"Well, he won the fight and vanished. I figure he was set to take a dive, let the other guy knock him out, and the gamblers would collect big on the long end of three to one. Only he not only didn't take the dive, he won. Then he vanished.

"No one would have noticed much," Rourke explained, "except he has a mother and she screamed murder to the cops up there, said the gamblers had killed her boy. The papers picked it up and asked what had happened to him. The old lady made such a stink the cops went to work on it.

"They found proof McNamara was very much alive. He'd been seen leaving town, and he took clothes and his book of clippings, a lot of stuff. But they couldn't find him. The first story we got on the wire was about him maybe being murdered; the second was about him only being missing and the cops still looking.

"The third story came in only about a week ago. It was one of those follow-up features, you know the kind, Mike: *The Mystery Of The Vanished Pugilist*. Sort of a Judge Crater type yarn. We didn't happen to run it, but it

did say the cops had traced McNamara to a small town in Florida called Palm Manor!"

"How did they trace him?" Shayne said quickly.

"Well, you remember I said he took some stuff with him? A pawnbroker in Palm Beach read the circular from Chicago on the stuff and reported he'd had a medal pawned by a guy who happened to mention Palm Manor. It was McNamara's medal, and the guy who pawned it just happened to mention Palm Manor. The cops checked the address the guy gave the pawnbroker, and it was a phony."

"Did the story tell that about Palm Manor?" Shayne asked.

"It sure did, Mike."

"Okay, Tim, and thanks a lot. Tell Lucy I'll be in Miami maybe tomorrow."

Shayne hung up. He had all he needed to call on the professional Mr. Smith. He walked from the motel office to the cottage where Mr. Smith was staying. He knocked.

The small, dapper man who opened the door took one look at Shayne and tried to close the door fast. Shayne crashed against the door. The small man jumped back from the door and clawed inside his suit coat. Shayne hit him hard. The small man collapsed on a heap.

Shayne searched the room, took the wicked-looking .45 from the



small man's shoulder holster, and began to revive Mr. Smith.

VI

IN THE DIM LIGHT of the Police Station the small man rubbed his chin and glared at Shayne. Lieutenant Bob Edwards said, "What is all this, Mike?"

"I don't know his name yet, Bob," Shayne said, "but I know the smell. He smells hired killer from ten miles away."

The small man spluttered. "I'll get your license for this, peeper! You can't walk into a guy's room and—"

"He's my friend who hit me with the forty-five," Shayne said, and he laid the automatic on Edwards' desk.

"You're dreamin', shamus," the small man sneered.

"You'd kill your mother for a quarter," Shayne said. "Tell us about Dave McNamara."

The small man turned white, then he turned red, then he shouted, "You can't pin it on me, Shayne! Okay, I came to see him,

but somebody done it before I got a chance to talk to him.

Edwards said, "McNamara? I heard that name somewhere."

Shayne told Edwards all that Tim Rourke had told him. When he finished the details, he said, "Dave McNamara and Mack Davis, see? My guess is he took what the syndicate paid him to lose, bet on himself to win, and ran for it."

"McNamara!" Edwards said. "Sure, we had a circular on him about two weeks ago. Chicago police said he was thought to be somewhere around here. We ran a routine check, but we didn't find him yet."

"You found him now," Shayne said grimly. "I'll bet on it. He probably planned to leave the country, but he knew the syndicate would be watching all the ways out of the country so he got on a bus and got off in the middle of nowhere and got a quiet job until the heat cooled."

Edwards looked puzzled. "But why pawn a medal if he had all that money?"

"I expect he figured the money could be traced," Shayne said. "Didn't you get a list of bills on that circular?"

"Yeh, I think we did," Edwards said. "But the Chicago police weren't going to hurt him, just find him."

Shayne said, "Ask Mr. Smith here about that."

The little man snarled, "Rocca, peeper, Angelo Rocca. Sure, we had them bills marked six ways from Sunday. All the serial numbers. We keep 'em on payoff bills, and the bookie who paid him off kept a record and we got it. He couldn't spend one dime of that thirty grand he had. He spends one stinking bill, an' the cops'd know it, and we got plenty of connections with the Chicago cops. That fink was smart, but we're smart, too."

Lieutenant Edwards said, "So you killed him, Rocca? Did you have to kill those kids, too! You punk little—"

Rocca cried, "I never killed him! I had a contract, sure, but like I said someone done it for me. So I hung around to find the loot. I slugged Shayne, only there wasn't no loot, I couldn't find it."

"You're a liar, Rocca!" Edwards said.

Shayne said, "Hold it, Bob. I think I believe him. Poison isn't his way. I searched his place and found nothing. He carries a forty-five, not a thirty-eight like the gun that shot at me. I think someone else got the money, and that's our killer."

"Hopewell!" Edwards said. "He was certainly looking for something." The Lieutenant picked up his telephone. "Get Hopewell in here."

Sam Petrie brought the tall, fat old principal into the room. Ed-

wards told Hopewell what they knew about the money. Hopewell began to shake.

"All right, Lieutenant," Hopewell stammered out, "it was the money I wanted. We need money at the school, I thought if I could get Davis to give it to us—I really didn't plan to steal it—I mean, well, I watched him to see if I could find where it was hidden, and I was going to, well—ask him for it."

Shayne said, "You found out from the story in the newspaper? The story that said McNamara had been traced here to Palm Manor? You read the story and you recognized Davis' description. You read about him being a boxer and you put two and two together."

Hopewell looked confused. "Story? I never saw any story."

Edwards said, "You wanted the money, Davis refused, maybe you tried a little blackmail and Davis was coming to the police so you killed him! Where's the money, Hopewell?"

Hopewell sweated with fear. "I didn't kill him! I don't even know where the money is! She told me about Davis, she told me about the money!" And Hopewell suddenly looked almost happy. "Of course! She did it, she found him, she got the money!"

Shayne snapped, "She? What women came to you?"

Hopewell said eagerly, "About

four days ago she came to my office. She said she was looking for a man named McNamara who had taken some money of hers and run away. She said it was a lot of money. She said McNamara was a boxer, and would probably be doing something athletic, so she decided to check the schools around here because he might be a coach or something. Of course I recognized Davis from her description, but I told her I didn't know such a man. I had decided to try for that money myself."

Edwards was disgusted. "Davis didn't have any women."

Shayne said to Rocca, "What about it, Rocca?"

"Her name's Alice Sullivan," Rocca said, and the small hood laughed. "I been tailin' her for a year. She's been after McNamara, an' I've been after her. She read that there story when we was up in Chicago and came here fast."

"The hairpin in that hiding place," Shayne said grimly. "Where is she now, Rocca?"

Rocca laughed again. "Right under your nose, Shayne. She checked into that Holiday Motel, just two rooms away from where you been stayin'. She's been watchin' you, an' I've been watchin' her. It was real cosy like."

VII

BY THE TIME Shayne and Edwards reached the Holiday Motel



the clerk told them that Alice Sullivan, or someone who answered the description Rocca and Hopewell had given them, had checked out.

Edwards drove back to the Police Station to direct an all points search for the woman, and to set up roadblocks. Shayne decided to make a thorough search of Alice Sullivan's room.

He found nothing, except a clipping from a Chicago paper. It was the third story about Dave McNamara, the one that told about Palm Manor. The clipping, some hairpins, lipstick smeared tissues, and two stockings with runs in them—that's all he found. Shayne left the room in disgust. He locked the door and had started to walk back to the motel office when he saw the flash of a small light. A moving flash of light in one of the motel units. It was in his own room!

The detective slid silently up to the window of his room. Inside a figure was moving. His room was in disorder. The person was searching his room. Carefully he raised the window, thanking himself for liking fresh air enough to leave the window open, and climbed in.

His big bulk moved with amazing silence. And speed. He climbed in, crept swiftly up behind the person, and clamped a vise-like grip on what he realized at once was a woman.

She let out a scream and struggled to get away. Shayne forced her into a chair. She struggled a moment longer and then sat still, shaking. Shayne turned on the light. She was a blonde, and very good looking.

"Hello, Alice," Shayne said. "You should have believed that principal and gone away."

The woman grimaced, her cour-

age returning. "That rat, telling me Dave wasn't here! The bum wanted it all for himself. And I deserved my share, I put up with that creep McNamara for years."

"Did you have to kill him to get it?"

"I didn't kill nobody!"

Shayne shook his head. "Come off it, Alice, I found this." He held up the hairpin. "Right where you lost it—you know where?"

"In Dave's room, I guess. I'm always losing the things."

"In the hiding place, Alice. Where's the money?"

The woman shrugged. "So I found the hiding place, a lot of good it did me. Would I be searching your pad if I'd found the loot? I was on my way out only I figured I'd make one last try. You got me."

Shayne stared at the woman. The redheaded detective began to tug on his left earlobe. It was logical. If she had the money she wouldn't have wasted time in a search. And Rocca wasn't a man to use poison. Gary Hopewell? That could be, but the fat principal did not seem like a murderer.

And they were the only three who had been in McNamara-Davis' room, who knew about the money. The murder had to be a result of the money. There was no other explanation except Rocca, and Shayne somehow believed Rocca.

Alice Sullivan said, "I guess I

should of listened to that principal and got out. Give me a break, Shayne, I didn't take nothin' from you, okay? I mean, I just wanted my share of Mack's loot. Wish I'd never read that stinkin' story in the—"

Shayne jerked his head toward her. "What?"

"I just said give me a break will you and—"

"No! That story! Alice, when you were looking for Davis, I mean McNamara, did you see anyone? Anyone hanging around his place or him?"

The woman seemed to think. "Well, there was this car I noticed. It followed me around a while. I figured that was Rocca—I mean after I saw him here. And there was a guy talked to Mack once or twice. Sort of a tall, skinny guy. I watched from far off, you know. Mack seemed mad at the guy, and—"

"I'll give you fifteen minutes before I tell Edwards," Shayne said, and he ran out the door to his car.

VIII

WHEN SHAYNE reached the center of town the streets were deserted except for the constant north-south traffic. It was almost clear in his mind now, but he had one more fact to be sure of. He parked and went into the newspaper office. Mancuso was work-

ing alone at his desk. The editor did not seem glad to see Shayne.

"You and Edwards decided to let me in on it?" Mancuso said.

"Just about," Shayne said. "One thing's still bothering me, Mancuso. That cyanide, it's not so easy to get."

"So it was cyanide," Mancuso said, "thanks for nothing."

"Okay, we're sorry, we just didn't want the killer to know what we knew."

"Well," Mancuso said grudgingly, "maybe you got a point." And the tall, cadaverous editor said, "I'll hold up on it, but are you even close to the killer?"

"Pretty close, only what we can't figure is the cyanide. I mean, that's a pretty hard to get chemical. We've traced Davis—real name is Dave McNamara, a fighter from Chicago. Maybe you heard of him, you came from Chicago?"

Mancuso thought a moment. "McNamara? Yeh, I seem to remember a fighter of that name. A spoiler if I got him right, not a mark on him but a slugger. I didn't know him very well."

"I know how it is," Shayne said. "The kind of man you wouldn't recognize unless you heard the name."

"Yeh, like that. Why'd he change his name and come here?"

"He was in trouble in Chicago," Shayne said. "Some hoods were after him. We picked up one right

here in town. Edwards has him now. Only we can't trace that poison."

"Those killers can get anything," Mancuso said.

"You are probably right," Shayne said. "What puzzles us is how a hired killer from up north would have known about Davis' habit of eating candy every morning."

"I guess he watched Davis for a while," Mancuso said. And the tall, thin editor looked at Shayne. "What do you want here, Shayne?"

Shayne said, "Cyanide is used in laboratories, in some dyes and paint colors, maybe in some special rat poisons and that sort of thing." And Shayne stared at Mancuso. "It's also used in electroplating plants."

"Is it?" Mancuso said.

Shayne nodded. "That's how you got it, isn't it? You'd have plenty of reason to visit an electroplating shop. Edwards won't have any trouble checking the records of the shop you use for your plates, he'll find you went there less than a week ago, right? It won't take him long to find the money."

Mancuso did not move. "You must be insane, Shayne. I go to that electro shop a couple of times every month."

Shayne fixed a careful eye on the tall editor. "The way I see it, you got that feature story about

McNamara being around Palm Manor. You didn't print it, but you read it. You connected McNamara and Davis right away, so you didn't print the story, you didn't want anyone else to know about it.

"You decided to blackmail Davis. Only he was tough, and then you spotted the Sullivan woman and Rocca. After you saw Rocca you knew there wasn't much time so you decided to steal the money.

"You knew that once you stole the money Davis would guess who had done it. Or maybe you were afraid Rocca would scare the story out of Davis and come after you after he finished with Davis. You couldn't steal the money without killing Davis, right?

"You never figured someone would see that bus and get the cops to run an autopsy on a man killed in a bus crash. You probably even figured the police would be too shocked by all the dead kids.

"You're the only one who could have known about both the habit of eating candy, and about Davis being McNamara because you read that feature story off the wire. Hopewell's not a killer, Rocca wouldn't use poison, Alice Sullivan doesn't have the money, and that leaves you."

The tall editor snarled at Shayne. "The punk wouldn't pay me anything! I read the story, I



knew who he was, but he wouldn't pay."

"So you killed a lot of kids just to cover a theft!"

"I'd have killed you too, if you hadn't got lucky out at that cottage," Mancuso said, and the editor's hand went for his top drawer.

Shayne took two steps and hit Mancuso. He hit the editor as hard as he could. Then he hit Mancuso again for the dead children. The editor lay unconscious on the floor, and Shayne went and called Edwards.

Edwards and his men finally found the money deposited in a bank in Palm Manor. Mancuso had deposited it in a phony name, but the passbook was hidden in one of the killer-editor's filing cabinets in the newspaper office.

Angelo Rocca went back to Chicago under guard charged with assault on Shayne. Alice

Sullivan made it as far as Atlanta, Georgia, where the police picked her up on a vagrancy charge. Edwards let Gary Hopewell off with a warning.

In his office, Edwards said, "Lucky you were on that highway, Mike, I don't think we'd have run the autopsy if you hadn't insisted. What tipped you on Mancuso?"

"The story," Shayne said. "When Alice Sullivan said she'd read the story it hit me that Hopewell swore he hadn't read the story. That meant the story hadn't appeared in Mancuso's newspaper. That was strange because I never heard of an editor who doesn't print a story *about his own town*."

"That story mentioned Palm Manor, but it wasn't in the local paper. Feature syndicated stories are the life blood of small town weeklies. Then I remembered you said Mancuso was from Chicago. And he had been very interested in the case all along.

"Then there was that piece of

printer's furniture, the piece of wood, and Alice Sullivan said someone else besides Rocca and herself had been near Davis that morning. Mancuso owned a long-barrelled thirty-eight, and he knew I was in town, so he could easily have been the one who shot at me. If it had been Rocca, I probably wouldn't be alive. It had to be Mancuso."

Edwards said, "We were lucky all right. You could have taken another highway."

"Didn't I tell you, Bob? I was on the main highway heading back to Miami—but they're constructing an overhead by-pass four miles north of town and I had to detour. That's why it's Mancuso to the gallows."

"We don't hang them anymore," Edwards said.

"Yes, I know. That's too bad," Shayne said. He was not going to forget the screams of those children for a long time, and he wanted Mancuso to remember those screams too.



A NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET NEXT MONTH

AN OPEN AND SHUT CASE

*Lady Stilson had a
minor eccentricity . . .
dangerous to a killer.*

by
STEPHEN
PAUL



SIR GEORGE STILSON, Baronet, climbed heavily into his vintage Rolls Royce, wound up the windows and tucked a rug round his ample middle. Then he tapped on his chauffeur's glass partition and settled back to read his newspaper on the forty mile run to London.

Soon his head began to nod. His chin nestled between the points of his high wing collar, and for the rest of the journey he did not stir.

An hour later the car stopped

outside the Lincoln's Inn offices of Waters, Waters and Stilson, Solicitors. Parker, the chauffeur, leaned in and tugged gently at Sir George's sleeve.

The distinguished member of the peerage did not protest. He was quite dead.

LADY STILSON stared incredulously at the inspector. A raw-boned athletic woman in her early forties, she seemed not to notice the draft of chilly October air from the wide open windows.

Detective Inspector Ian Bruce kept his topcoat on.

"Exhaust fumes?" frowned Lady Stilson. "That's hard to believe. The car was in perfect order."

The Inspector shook his head. "Not quite, I'm afraid, Lady Stilson. Sergeant Price found a piece of gas piping from the silencer to a hole drilled by your husband's feet. It was only a small hole, hidden by his travelling rug. Crude, but unfortunately effective."

For a moment Lady Stilson looked aggressively disbelieving. "But, Inspector, I used the car myself yesterday."

Bruce looked up. "Precisely what time was that?"

"Parker drove me to church," she said. "We got back about eight."

The Inspector nodded. "Then the car must have been tampered with between eight last night and the time your husband set out this morning. Thank you, Lady Stilson. That should help us quite a bit."

"Frankly, I can't see how," she remarked acidly. "For one thing, no one could have gotten at the car. Only my husband, Parker and my nephew—when he's here—have keys to the garage."

The Inspector said nothing, but he had the impression Sir George's widow was deriving great satisfaction from the complexities he was beginning to encounter.

"Oh, don't go suspecting Parker," she added. "I saw him put

the car away myself, and I happen to know he spent the night with his sister at Fallingham. He came back early this morning in time to take my husband to town."

"Yes," the Inspector said, smiling. "I've had a word with Parker."

"He amused you, apparently."

"He told me he couldn't have a better employer—or an easier job. I gather your husband didn't use the car much."

"He disliked motoring. It tired him. He used the car only once a week, for his board meetings on Mondays."

"And you; Lady Stilson?"

"On Sundays, because the church I attend is in the next village. Otherwise never. I prefer to walk."

Inspector Bruce involuntarily eyed Lady Stilson's stout brogues and woollen-stockinged legs. He could well imagine her contempt for comfort.

Then suddenly he looked grim. "Lady Stilson, I understand your husband also had another reason for going to town today."

She glanced up sharply. "What reason?"

"To see his solicitor. Was it about changing his will?"

She was silent.

"I should like to know more about it, ma'am."

"You seem to know a great deal already," she snapped. "All right. You'll find out anyway, I suppose,

so I may as well tell you. My husband intended to disinherit my nephew."

"Why?"

"Really, I don't see—"

"I'm afraid I must ask you to explain," the Inspector said quietly.

She took a deep breath. "They quarreled on Friday about Ronald's gambling debts. Sir George threatened to cut him out of his will, and this time he really meant it."

"I see." Inspector Bruce was silent for a moment. Then he tightened his lips and looked straight at Lady Stilson. "You said your nephew also had a key to the garage?"

She nodded. "Yes, he did. But that won't help you much. He went to Paris on Saturday morning and came back today, on a late afternoon plane."

"And you used the car yesterday. Yes, I see what you mean." Bruce felt frustrated and her obvious scorn didn't help. He groped for his pipe, caught her glance and thought better of it.

"Since your nephew lives close by, do you mind if I call and ask him to come here. I'd like to talk to him?"

Twenty minutes later Inspector Bruce was questioning the dead baronet's nephew.

"Let's close a few windows and talk in comfort—this room's like an icebox," the young man said.

Ronald Stilson, tall, mustached and faultlessly attired, strode across the room as he spoke, his broad shoulders held straight.

Inspector Bruce watched him with amused relief. "I'm afraid your aunt won't approve," he said. "She seems addicted to fresh air."

Ronald smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, not particularly. At any rate, she won't notice."

He was smiling when he snapped the last window shut and turned back to face Bruce. "Now Inspector, a drink?"

The police officer shook his head. "Not for me, thanks. But you go ahead. I expect this has been a great shock to you?"

"Naturally." Stilson poured a whisky. "After the falling out we had, too. You heard about that? It seems the old chap really took it seriously."

"But you didn't?"

"Why should I?" Ronald raised his glass. "Cheers. No, I wasn't seriously upset. He'd often threatened to cut me off before, but he never did anything about it. He was gruff and forthright, but incapable of holding a grudge. He said what he had to say and that was the end of it."

The Inspector nodded. "So you naturally assumed it would be no different this time?"

"I saw no reason to assume otherwise. I hopped a plane to Paris and never gave it another thought."

"That was on Saturday?"

"On Saturday, yes. I got back this afternoon." Ronald paused and then added softly; "So you see, Inspector, I may have had the motive, but hardly the opportunity." He smiled his confident smile and fingered his mustache.

Bruce chewed on his pipe. "Quite," he said . . .

Driving back to Scotland Yard Inspector Bruce was forced to admit to himself that he was completely baffled.

"That car must have been fixed between last night and this morning," he said to the man at his side. "But how? The thing's impossible."

Sergeant Price grunted in sympathy. "Are you happy about the nephew, sir?"

"He seems to be in the clear. He was in Paris all right, and at the time he says."

Huddled in his overcoat the Inspector morosely tried to light his pipe.

"Shut that damned window, man," he grunted. "We haven't got her ladyship here now . . ." He stopped abruptly.

"What is it, sir?"

Inspector Bruce was smiling grimly. "An observant killer—and a clever one," he said slowly. "Turn around. We're going back."

Lady Stilson and her nephew

were having tea when Inspector Bruce was announced.

"Sorry to intrude again," he said. "No, I won't take my coat off. This won't take long. Besides," he added, glancing humorously at Ronald, "I see your aunt did notice after all."

"Notice what?" demanded Lady Stilson.

"The windows. I'm afraid we closed them. Your nephew said you wouldn't notice."

"Nonsense," she said. "Of course I noticed. I never allow windows to be closed."

"Not even car windows, Lady Stilson?"

"Certainly not. I always have them wide open. Ronald knows that."

"That's what I thought," said the Inspector. Then he looked again at Ronald, his good-humored expression gone.

"I'm arresting you for murder," he said. "I must warn you that anything you say can be used as evidence against you. You did have a key to the garage. Lady Stilson has assured me of that. And some one had to enter the garage and close the car window behind the chauffeur's glass partition before the car left the garage, to enable the exhaust fumes to kill Sir George."

"It was done before you took off for Paris!"

Three SHAYNE Stories

You May Have Missed

If you've just discovered our magazine you may not have read any of the previously published issues. And if you are a real dyed-in-the-wool Shayne fan—and who isn't—you'll want to read them. We have a limited supply left of some of these back copies and they are yours—by filling out the conveniently printed coupon.



3 SHAYNE NOVELETS for only \$1

No. 1 ... THE DEBT OF DEATH by Brett Halliday (June, 1960)

A long-odd crime gamble in Miami may be much the same, percentage-wise, as it would be in New York or the Windy City. Except that—trapping killers in Miami was Michael Shayne's particular specialty.

No. 2 ... MURDER ON JUNGLE KEY by Brett Halliday (July, 1960)

The murdered man had been a preacher with a rare gift of eloquence. It was hard to believe that death could have actually silenced his voice forever. So Mike listened . . . for Guilt's self-accusing whisper.

No. 3 ... BLOOD OF AN ORANGE by Brett Halliday (August, 1960)

It was really hard for Mike Shayne to believe that an orange grove in the bright Florida sunlight could in any way be haunted by the dark specters of arson and murder. But the nightmare was real.

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April 63

DEATH WAITS IN THE DARKROOM

*Through the blackness a light stabbed out,
and Julie suddenly, terrifyingly, smelled chloroform. Someone
was going to be killed—*

By KELLY ROOS

IT HAD STARTED raining about six o'clock, a cold, blue October rain that slashed horizontally against the windows. In the living-room, warm, saffron-colored lamp-light and the log fire's crackle and snap waged a losing battle with the dreariness of the dark that was swallowing the city outside. The sulking wind and the squealing sound of tires on wet pavements below all added their bit to my already mounting nervousness.

I had spent the last two hours giving Jeff ten more minutes to come home—ten minutes before I began divorce proceedings or tel-

ephone calls to New York's long list of hospitals to see if any attractive young husbands had been spoiled by skidding trucks. I was consoling myself with the thought that all new wives act this way, when the panicky rapping came at the door.

"Who is it?" I called.

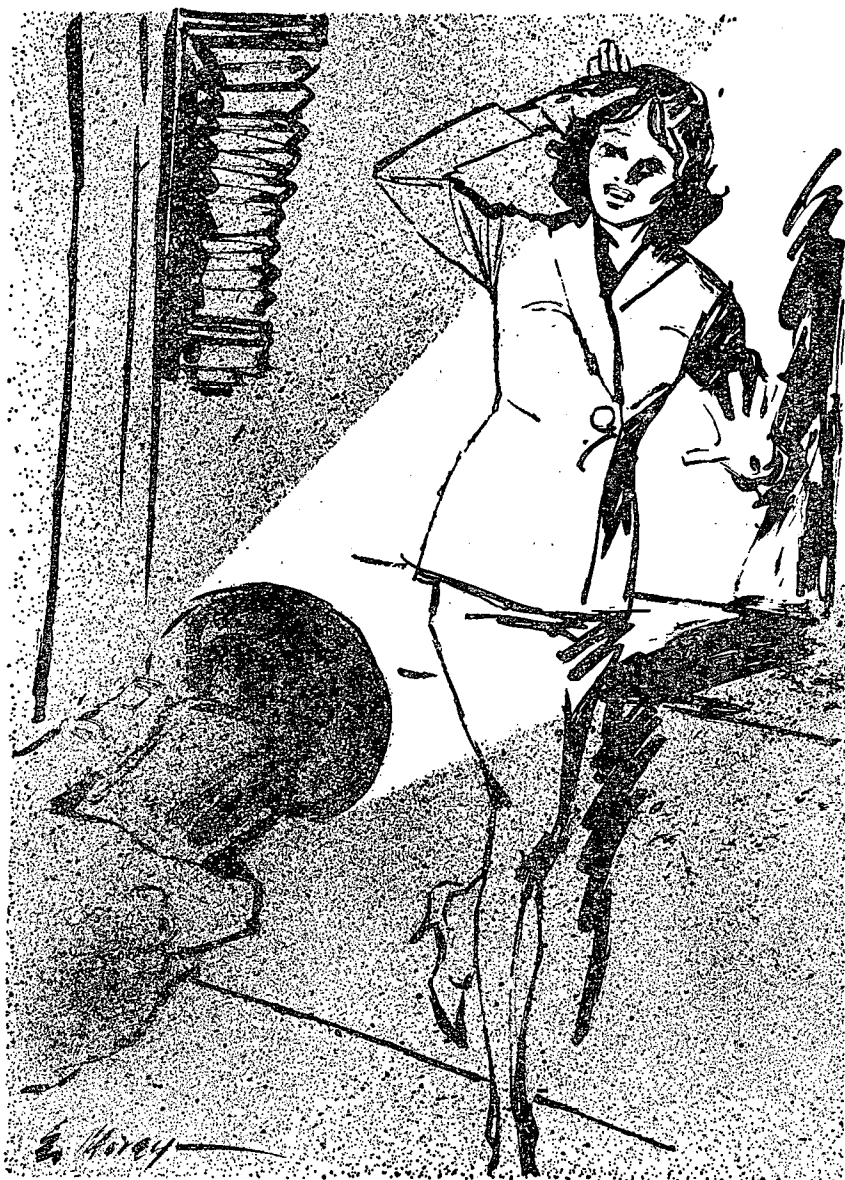
"It's Julie . . . Julie Taylor!"

I opened the door.

One good look at Julie's face made me whisk her inside and slam the door shut. It was her eyes that had done it. There was alarm in them and something close to deadly fear.

© 1941, by Kelly Roos

A Short Mystery Novel featuring Haila and Jeff Troy



CAST OF CHARACTERS

JEFFREY TROY

Clever amateur detective

HAILA TROY

His newly acquired bride

MAC MACCORMICK

Brilliant photographer

ERIKA MACCORMICK

His beautiful wife

MRS. ISABELLE FLEMING

Erika's wealthy aunt

KIRK FINDLAY

MacCormick's chatty assistant

HARRY DUERR

Set builder

JULIE TAYLOR

Stylist

MISS FROST

Julie's dour neighbor

MAY RALSTON

LEE KENYON

ROBERT YORKE

Professional models

LIEUTENANT

DETECTIVE WYATT

and his assistant

LOCKHART

"Julie!" I demanded. "What's wrong?"

"Isn't Jeff here, Haila?"

"No, he's out looking for a job."

"You're expecting him?" Her voice was almost unfriendly in its tenseness.

"Yes, but you know Jeff. . . . Julie, what's happened?"

For a moment she didn't answer. Then, with a half-angry gesture, she shoved her hat back from her face and looked up at me. "Haila, I'm sorry. Now that I'm here I . . . I can't believe that what happened really did happen. It couldn't have. If I told you, you'd think I was silly—"

"Did it happen at work?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"This afternoon. But, Haila—"

"Go on, Julie," I said firmly.

"This afternoon at Photo Arts."

"All right." She took a deep breath. "We took a picture this afternoon. Or rather Mac took the picture, with the rest of us trying to keep out of his way. It was a Cottrell Silverware ad."

"Cottrell Silver! Then your boss is in the big time now!"

"This was Mac's chance. And we had to make good. We shot it in full color, and we went the limit. A wonderful set, gorgeous furniture and glassware, lots of flowers, everything."

"And a beautiful star of stage, screen, television, and radio endorsing?"

"Better than that, Haila. Mrs. Isabelle Fleming."

"No!"

"Yes. High society is better for silver than Hollywood."

"But *the* Mrs. Fleming, Julie! I thought she wouldn't even endorse the Bible. Not publicly, anyhow."

"Mac arranged this."

"But how?"

"Mrs. Fleming is Erika MacCormack's aunt. You remember Erika, don't you?"

I remembered Erika, all right. It would have been impossible to forget that face and figure. But I hadn't known that she came of such illustriously social stock. So Mac MacCormick had married all that, and a gate into the four hundred, too. Not that he would even consider swinging on that gate.

"Go on, Julie," I said.

"Besides Mrs. Fleming we had three models. The picture was a dinner party, supposedly in Mrs. Fleming's Fifth Avenue house—"

"Yes, Julie."

"Well, after the picture had been taken, I went into the darkroom to get my prop list. I knew right where I'd left it, so I didn't bother turning on the lights. I was just reaching up to the shelf for it when I heard the sound. I don't frighten at sounds, Haila; I'm not usually jumpy or nervous. But when you hear a noise that has danger in it, you can sense that danger somehow."

I nodded my agreement.

"Haila, there was someone in the darkroom with me. Someone who didn't want me to know he was there. He'd been waiting; he'd let me come in and cross the room, and then he closed the door. He closed me in there with him. It was horrible!"

"That was the noise you heard?"

"Yes. Neither of us moved. We just stood there. Waiting. Finally I managed to whisper, 'Who is it?' And then a beam of light hit me in the face. It shocked me, and I put my hands over my eyes. When I looked again the light was gone. The room was pitch-black and there wasn't a sound."

"I stood there, waiting for something to happen. Then I noticed it. An odor, a strange odor. I guess it was that smell that jerked me out of my trance. I made a dive for the wall switch and turned on the lights. The room was empty."

"But, Julie—"

"There was no one there, Haila," Julie said deliberately. She looked down at her tightly clasped hands. "Whoever had been there had slipped out while I was blinded by the flashlight."

"Where was everybody while this was going on?"

"As soon as I got out of the darkroom I checked out. Nobody had left the place. And nobody looked as if he had just finished scaring me to death. The models were changing into their street

clothes in their dressing-rooms. Mrs. Fleming was saying good-by to Mac. Harry Duerr—he's a new man we have who builds our sets for us—was working in the studio with Kirk."

"Julie, it must have been a joke. Kirk and Mac—"

"Kirk and Mac aren't practical jokers, Haila."

Julie was right. There was nothing practical about those two young men, not even their jokes. Furthermore, Kirk Findlay, who was Mac's assistant, had been spending each working day and overtime for the last year adoring Julie. And scaring girls out of their wits didn't lead them to altars.

"But what did Kirk and Mac think about all this Julie?"

She pulled the creases out of her forehead with a tired hand. "I didn't tell them. They would have laughed at me. All of a sudden it began to seem silly, even to me."

"Then why did you come rushing up here for Jeff?"

Her hands clenched again. "That odor in the darkroom. I didn't realize what it was until a little while ago, after I got home. It was chloroform."

"Chloroform!"

"I'm not wrong, Haila. That person in the darkroom was there to murder."

"Julie, you're jumping to conclusions, you're—"

"There aren't any butterflies in the darkroom. Or dogs too old to

live." She smiled grimly. "Oh, it wasn't I he meant to murder. He had every chance to do just that, and he didn't. He must have realized when I spoke that I wasn't his—his victim. The flashlight was to make sure."

"Then . . . someone else was meant to come in. Who, Julie?"

She shook her head slowly. "I don't know. And I don't know who it was that was waiting in the darkroom." She leaned forward suddenly. "Oh, Haila, nothing's happened yet; I'm sure it hasn't. But that doesn't mean nothing will happen. Jeff's got to help; he's got to keep this murder from being committed!"

"But, Julie, he can't . . ."

"Jeff could do *something*! Oh, Haila, you must find him."

"I'm sure he'll be here any minute, Julie. And in the meantime let's try to use our own brains. Who were the models you used?"

"You wouldn't know them, Haila."

She was probably right. My days as a model had ended long ago. I hadn't done any posing for years, not since I had begun getting enough acting jobs to keep me alive.

"Well, there was Kirk and Mac and you," I said. "I know the three of you. And Mrs. Isabelle Fleming, whom the social climber in me would give an arm to know. And this Harry Duerr and three models. Eight people who include

one murderer and at least one victim."

"Yes."

The weariness in Julie's voice started me toward the liquor cabinet. I was pouring her some brandy when the phone rang. It was a call for Julie.

She pivoted to me, and once again her face was flooded with alarm. Slowly, she crossed the room and lifted the phone. The conversation was short and, on Julie's part, monosyllabic. When she hung up she placed the phone carefully back on the desk.

"It was Kirk," she said very quietly. "He's been calling everywhere for me. Something went wrong with the picture we took today. We're retaking it tonight. In an hour."

I said, "Julie! That means . . ."

"The same people in the same place. Our murderer's going to be given another chance."

"Julie, you've got to get up there and tell Mac and Kirk!"

"Yes." She was buttoning her still soggy coat. "You find Jeff. Send him straight up to the studio. We're in the Graylock Building now, remember. Haila, hurry; please hurry!"

I was already at the telephone when the door closed behind Julie.

The rain was driving down with a new violence. The wind whistled down the narrow cavern of East Ninety-third Street. And downtown, sixty blocks through this



murky wetness, a murder had been arranged.

But perhaps Julie was wrong. Perhaps she had been working too hard. Officially, she was stylist at Photo Arts, but unofficially she was also errand boy, secretary, office manager, and bartender all rolled into one. Overworked and overtired, her imagination was playing tricks on her.

II

I RAN INTO the bedroom. While I struggled into an old raincoat, I managed to scrawl an urgent summons to Jeff. Julie Taylor needed help. Help which, perhaps, couldn't wait for Jeff.

I started for the Graylock Building.

The beautiful studio on the fifty-third floor of the Graylock Building wasn't much like the Photo Arts where I had modeled in the good old days. Then it had been just one large, musty room on East Twenty-first Street. And business, to put it mildly, had been slack. But that never seemed to bother Mac and Kirk and Julie. They'd sit around in the big, barn-like loft and drink cheap bourbon out of paper cups and talk.

I was one of the models who called on them regularly, not so much in the hope of getting a job, but because while you were there you forgot, somehow, that you weren't becoming America's great-

est actress as quickly as you had dreamed.

No one ever knew how they managed. They'd pawn their cameras to pay their models, and then borrow back the pay to redeem the cameras. How they kept that cycle from breaking down was a mystery.

But all that was before Erika came along. I was there the day that Kirk proudly introduced her to Mac, and I had seen romance begin with that moment. It was wanting to marry her that had made Mac settle down and try to amount to something. And, from the looks of this studio, he had.

Expensive photographic equipment, cameras, and lights were everywhere. There were piles of props, ranging from a horsehair sofa to a streamlined kitchen sink. In the center of the set, a magnificent dining-room, was semi-encircled by more cameras and more lights.

In a corner stood the most anachronistic note in all that modern science: Julie's old, battered desk and a decrepit paper-cup machine that the boys must have sentimentally lugged to their new cathedral.

Julie was not to be seen, and Mac was too busy to notice my entrance. But nobody ever accused Kirk Findlay of being too busy. Disengaging himself from a group of models, he stormed across the studio toward me.

"Haila Rogers!" Kirk cried.

"Haila Troy," I corrected him smugly.

"That's right. Have you seen Jeff since the wedding?"

"Not very clearly. Where's Julie, Kirk?"

"Julie?"

"You know, the girl you've been neglecting to marry all these years."

He grinned. His rust-red hair still stood on end and everything about him still sparkled—his eyes, his teeth, even his ears. "She's around some place," he said. "Look, Haila; you were in a show! We saw it. Mac and Erika and Julie and I."

I shook my head. "Not that many seats were sold, Kirk."

"We all sat in the same seat," he said.

"Haila!" Mac was advancing upon me, and I wouldn't have traded his yelp of delight for an Academy Award. He pumped my arm so dry it practically began to flake.

"We've missed you, Haila," Mac said. "Sorely. Where's Jeff?"

"I can't be sure, but I think he's looking for a job."

"A job for you?"

"For himself," I boasted.

"You've ruined him already," Kirk said. "Has he been solving any baffling crimes lately?"

"No, he's tired of solving baffling crimes. He wants to earn a living."

"You certainly have ruined



him, Haila." Mac laughed, and his wonderfully homely face broke into that gleeful expression which made female models offer to pose for less than the minimum rate.

I was about to break away and institute a search for Julie, when the big double doors at the end of

the studio swung open. Through them strode a woman of about sixty-five, whose white hair, thin nose and narrow green eyes were displayed with proper regularity on the society pages of every newspaper in New York. I didn't need to be told who she was.

"Ralph!" Mrs. Fleming summoned Mac to her. "Ralph, what's the matter? Why are we taking this picture over?"

Mac hesitated. "I'm sorry, Aunt Isabelle. There was a slip-up this afternoon."

"Yes?" It was obvious that Isabelle Fleming demanded more of an explanation than that.

"Well, you see . . ." Mac said, and bogged down.

"Yes?" Mrs. Fleming repeated.

"The plates have been mislaid." Mac's face turned crimson.

I almost gasped aloud. In my preoccupation with more dire things I had not even wondered why the picture had to be retaken. If I had thought about it at all I should have imagined that a model had been badly posed or that the lighting had been wrong. But any explanation so incredible as mislaid plates would never have entered my head. For no reason that I could name the uneasiness which Kirk's and Mac's high spirits had succeeded in quelling arose again.

"How could the plates have possibly been mislaid?" Mrs. Fleming was asking.

"It's my fault!" Kirk announced.

"No," Mac said quickly. "It wasn't Kirk's fault. It wasn't anybody's. It was—just one of those things," he finished lamely.

"Just one of those things," Mrs. Fleming said, "that will happen in any efficiently run business." There was more censure in the thin smile that crossed her lips than could have been crammed into an hour's harangue. "Well, since I must make an exhibit of myself again, let's at least get on with it."

"Places, everybody!" MacCormick shouted.

Dropping her evening wraps, Mrs. Fleming walked to the set and took her place at the head of the table. The three models followed her. I recognized the girl from the ads. She was a healthy young blonde whose vermilion lips achieved a pout so cute it sold everything from hosiery to tractors. She bounced into a chair at Mrs. Fleming's right.

The younger of the two men sat at the foot of the table. I knew his face, too. He was the swain the damsel in the picture gets. Mrs. Fleming's other guest I wouldn't have minded entertaining, myself. For a second his beautiful black hair, his straight nose and beguiling smile almost made me forget what had brought me to Photo Arts.

But certainly no foul thoughts of violent death lurked behind that face, nor behind that typical

American Young Man face of his colleague beside him. And Goldilocks could hardly have been Julie's would-be murderer. I doubted if those pouting lips could form a word as long as "chloroform" distinctly enough for a druggist to understand.

Then I saw Julie. She was standing just inside the big, swinging doors. Her eyes were on me; she was waiting for my attention. After a glance to see that no one was noticing, she slowly shook her head and placed a finger across her lips.

So the murder had been called off! Probably on account of rain. And I wasn't to even mention it to anyone. Well, that was just fine with me. Now I could relax and watch the birdie.

"Hey, Harry!" Mac was yelling.

"Yes, Mac?" Out of a corner came a young man I hadn't noticed before. He was about thirty, very tall, and awkward because of his height. I liked him immediately; his shyness was a pleasant contrast to the assured charm of the two male models. This, I thought, must be Harry Duerr, the set builder whom Julie had mentioned.

"Harry," Mac said, "there's a shadow on your back wall. What is it?"

Harry's eyes roved over the set. He smiled. "It's Kirk."

Kirk jumped away from the edge of the set and the shadow disappeared. Everyone, with the

exception of Mrs. Fleming, guffawed. Kirk stood sheepishly behind Mac at the camera.

"Now you're looking at Mrs. Fleming, remember," Mac told the models. They all looked at her, and she, the perfect hostess, smiled graciously at them and held the smile.

"Kenyon," Mac went on, "drop your left shoulder a little." The left shoulder at the foot of the table dropped a little. "That's fine now. No wait! May, swing your head toward Mrs. Fleming more."

He laughed at the blonde's dirty look. "I know it's away from the camera. But we'll try to get you to Hollywood the next time we use you." Mac took one last critical squint over the camera. "All right, now. Pretend you aren't having your picture taken."

"Pretend you're people," Kirk said.

Mrs. Isabelle Fleming might have been billed as the star of the picture they were taking, but Cottrell Silver was in a fine position to steal it from her. The table was crammed with it. At each place seven pieces gleamed, and the flower bowl in the center was unmistakably Cottrell. Spread around it in profusion were all the odd pieces in the Cottrell cast—a salad fork, two serving spoons, a gravy ladle, and, in front of Mrs. Fleming, an elaborately scrolled carving set.

The Cottrell Company, I

thought, was making Isabelle Fleming a more exhibitionistic than discriminating hostess.

The camera clicked, and Mac said, "We'll shoot again in ten minutes. Remember your places, everyone."

"Shoot again?" I said to Kirk. "Was that just for fun?"

"We take a test negative in black and white before we shoot it in color. Color film's too expensive to make mistakes on."

"Kirk!" Mac called. "Will you develop these plates? I want to tone down these flowers a bit."

Taking the plates from Mac, Kirk dashed for the darkroom. The models moved carefully out of the set, and Mrs. Fleming, without a word to anyone, started for her dressing-room.

I was about to sneak up on Julie and ask her some pointed questions about the canceling of the murder she had promised me, when a smooth voice behind me said, "I've been waiting impatiently for an opportunity to meet this lovely young lady. My name is Robert Yorke."

The voice belonged to the handsome gentleman who had been at Mrs. Fleming's left.

"I've seen you on the stage," Robert Yorke said. "I'm in the theater, too. Won't you have a cigarette?"

"Thanks, I need one."

"Light?"

"Thanks, I need one."

Yorke laughed. Mainly, I suspected, to show me his perfect teeth. After he had got my tobacco burning, he said, "I'd like you to meet Lee Kenyon. He and I share an apartment. He's young, but likable. Ordinarily, that is. Today he's in a strange humor."

Taking me by the elbow, he escorted me to a corner where the other two models were smoking. He introduced me to Lee Kenyon and May Ralston.

"How do you do?" I said.

"Swell!" May said softly.

"You're on the stage, huh?"

"Now and then," I admitted.

"You think I could get on?"

"Ain't you on?" Lee Kenyon mocked.

May beamed sunnily at him. "I used to do stage stuff. Until one night my father was at the same banquet."

Kenyon opened his mouth to speak, but didn't. Mrs. Fleming, returning from her dressing-room, was approaching us. She passed without stopping.

Kenyon turned to her: "Lovely evening, Mrs. Fleming."

His tone startled me. Never had I heard so much rank impudence in four ordinary, innocent words.

Mrs. Fleming said evenly, without glancing at him, "Yes, isn't it?"

"And how is your charming niece?"

"Better now, I'm sure."

Her words drifted back to us

from the other side of the studio, where she stopped beside Julie at her desk. She hadn't so much as paused throughout the conversation.

"What the devil, Lee!" Robert Yorke exploded. "I suppose you think that was clever!"

"It amused me."

"What have you got against her?" May asked, with interest. "Just her money?"

"I hardly think he'd hold that against her," Yorke said unpleasantly. "He turned this job down until he heard that Isabelle Fleming was posing for the picture. But his social climbing didn't pan out as he hoped. He's getting even by being a nasty child."

"I've met Mrs. Fleming before," Kenyon said airily. "Erika's brought her around several times to see me dance."

Robert Yorke turned smilingly to me. "Erika MacCormick is Lee's patron saint, you know. She discovered him tapping to Beethoven and trucking to Mozart at one of those dives he's always working at. She got him a job at a Fifty-second Street club. But Lee was too artistic; he lost the job in a hurry."

So Lee Kenyon was a dancer. That kept my record intact. I had never met a man who admitted that posing was his career.

Kenyon was looking maliciously at Yorke. "Why is it, Mrs. Troy, that Broadway managers are so

stupid. Yorke hasn't had a part for seven years."

The actor flushed angrily, and I dived in to change the subject: "Are you dancing some place now, Lee?"

"Yes."

"Where at?" May asked.

Yorke answered for him: "At the Barrel Room! Located on Greenwich Village's swanky Sullivan Street!"

"What do you do?" May asked.

"He taps while the girls get undressed for their next number," Yorke said.

"My biographer!" Kenyon dismissed Yorke shortly. "At the moment I dance at a village hot spot. But at some moment soon I'll be doing things at Carnegie Hall. It's inevitable. Just like Yorke's working himself up to a walk-on."

Before Yorke could reply, Harry Duerr, suddenly appearing out of nowhere, rescued me from that charming group and led me out of the studio.

"I thought you might like to see the place," he said. Then, with a twinkle in his serious eyes, he added, "I think it's safer, really. There may be blows struck."

It took nearly ten minutes to cover the new Photo Arts, the thick-carpeted, mirrored dressing-rooms, the up-to-the-minute dark-and drying-rooms, reception-rooms, and offices. We didn't return to the studio until we heard Mac's voice bellowing for places.

In a short time the picture had been made, and Mrs. Fleming and the models were hurrying out to dress. Kirk rushed past me again, the plates clutched to his chest; this set was not going to be mislaid.

I began to feel just a tinge of annoyance at Julie Taylor, who was still diligently avoiding me. Here I had come dashing down to Photo Arts to help prevent a murder, and I was being ignored. The heck with her; I was going home.

It was just as I crossed the corridor that I heard Mac's voice coming from the darkroom. "Kirk!" he said. "Look!"

Quick footsteps crossed the darkroom floor; then Kirk's voice, sharp, like Mac's: "What the hell! Our plates! The pictures we took this afternoon!"

"Yes." The one word was grim. "No wonder we couldn't find them."

There was the clinking sound of broken glass, then Kirk's incredulous voice: "They've been smashed to pieces!"

"Deliberately. I've dropped enough of them to know it couldn't have happened by accident. They've been smashed with a hammer and hidden here. I knew we couldn't so easily mislay a set of plates!"

I didn't wait to hear any more. I had to see Julie. The plates had not been mislaid; they had been

deliberately smashed. Why? The answer to that word screamed its warning.

A murder had been attempted this afternoon at Photo Arts. And the killer had not changed his plans, as Julie's signaling to me had indicated. He had broken the plates so that the picture would have to be retaken, so that the same people would be reassembled. So that he could try again.

Julie was at the dining table, packing silverware into a plush-lined case. I tried to keep my voice low and steady.

"Julie," I said, "the plates . . . the pictures taken this afternoon. They weren't lost. They were smashed, Julie."

She looked up at me, and it shocked me more that her eyes were calm than if they had been wild and full of all the terror I was feeling. She said slowly, "I know."

I put my hand out and grasped her shoulder. I shook her hard. "Julie, don't you see what this means? It means you were right about this afternoon! That person in the darkroom was a murderer. He broke those plates so that he could get another chance tonight. We've got to tell Kirk and Mac! We've got to warn . . ."

"Haila, don't be silly. I was wrong this afternoon, I . . ."

"I'll tell them myself if you won't!"

Too swiftly for me to realize what was happening, she had

caught me by the wrist. Her voice was cold: "You won't say a word about this afternoon. You won't mention it to anyone. I won't let you."

I wrenched my arm free with a sudden jark. "I'm going to tell them. Now! We can't take chances . . ."

"Haila!" Her command was flat and sullen. "All right, you win. Listen, Haila. No murderer broke those plates." She raised her head defiantly. "I smashed them."

"You smashed them!"

"Yes. Now you know. Now let me alone. Forget about it."

She turned again to the silver. Viciously she continued storing it away. Then suddenly she dropped a fork upon the table. With a smothered exclamation she ran from the studio.

I was too shocked, too bewildered, to think any more or even to try to reason. None of this was my business. Why wasn't I home being a good and happy wife?

"Julie!"

It was Kirk's voice, shouting wildly. He flashed across the studio doorway, running down the corridor. I heard a door slam, then another, then Mac's voice, shouting too. I saw the streak of May Ralston's golden head as she raced down the hall. I followed.

They were standing there outside a dressing-room door, Mac and Kirk and May and the others, and they were bending over a limp



little form huddled on the floor. I saw Mac push Kirk aside and raise Julie's head. After a moment her eyelids fluttered. She turned her head toward the door, and a whimpering sound broke from her lips.

Kirk kicked open the door.

Mrs. Isabelle Fleming sat before her make-up table, her eyes focused into the mirror at a point above her head. Her mouth was slightly open in a grimace.

I saw all that in the glass. The eyes, the mouth, the hands.

Then I saw that Isabelle Fleming was sitting there, erect and somehow dignified, with the Cottrell Silver carving knife sticking out of the back of her neck.

III

"WE'RE GETTING along fine," Lieutenant Detective Wyatt said, with weary sarcasm. "After three solid hours we're right back where we started."

He was a short, thick man with India-ink black eyes and close-cropped hair. His assistant, Lockhart, was pink and plump.

"All we know," Wyatt's voice dragged on, "is that any one of you could have taken that knife and used it."

"Except MacCormick," Lockhart corrected. "He couldn't have taken the knife. His pal Duerr says so."

"What are you insinuating?" Harry demanded.

"What do you mean, insinuate?" Lockhart asked.

"Between the time that the final picture was taken," Harry said emphatically, "and the discovery of the . . . the body, Mac didn't go near that table. I know he didn't."

"And if MacCormack didn't go near the table," Wyatt said, "he couldn't have taken the knife. And if he didn't take the knife, he couldn't have used it. That plain enough, Lockhart?"

"I apologize for insinuating," Lockhart said.

"MacCormick!" Wyatt snapped. "You still can't imagine where your wife might be?"

"No, sir; I can't."

"And you, yourself, can't tell me about the victim's will?"

"I'd rather have my wife tell you."

Wyatt leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. If he needs a few minutes' rest, I thought bitterly, we poor suspects could use a month in a sanatorium.

Before this futile questioning had begun we had huddled for hours in one corner of the cold studio, while the medical examiner and the police photographers and the fingerprint men had gone through their gruesome routine. And finally, after white-clad men had carried away a white-covered stretcher, the two detectives descended upon us.

Now May Ralston, completely demoralized, was slumped down in a chair between Robert Yorke and Kenyon. Julie sat alone, closer to the detectives than any of us, as if she wanted to bear the brunt of their endless attack. Kirk and Mac and Harry surrounded me. They seemed apologetic for the hospitality I was receiving under their roof.

Wyatt finally spoke, very slowly and thoughtfully: "MacCormick, I'd like to see those pictures you took tonight."

"Of course," Mac said. "They haven't been printed yet, but you can see the negatives, the color plates."

"I'll get them!" Kirk was already on his way out.

"They're in the drying-room, Kirk."

"Hurry, Findlay," Wyatt said.

"Mr. Wyatt," May Ralston said, "can I please go home? I didn't kill Mrs. Fleming—honest, I didn't."

"Cross your heart?" Lockhart asked.

"Wait till Findlay gets back, Miss Ralston," Wyatt said.

We hadn't long to wait. In a few minutes Kirk appeared. His face was a study in bewilderment and his hands were empty. "The negatives," he said dully, "are missing."

Mac said impatiently, "In the drying-room, Kirk."

"No. Nor in the darkroom, either. The test negative is there, but not the final shot."

The palm of Wyatt's hand slammed down on the desk. "What kind of a business is this? Do you ever keep any of the pictures you take? This afternoon's smashed and now these. C'mon, Lockhart; we'll have a look!"

My eyes jumped to Julie. Twice in one day that had happened. Both times that Isabelle Fleming had been photographed the negatives had got as far as the darkroom, and no farther. I couldn't keep quiet any longer. I had to tell Wyatt what had happened to her in the darkroom. I had to tell him, too, that it had been Julie who had broken the first set of plates.

She was looking at me hard; she

knew my thoughts. She made no movement, but her whole body telegraphed a frantic message: "No, Haila: don't! Please, please, don't!"

The door swung open. Wyatt, followed by Lockhart, crossed directly to Mac. The missing negatives were in his hands. "Here they are," he said cheerfully. "MacCormick, you explain them to me."

"Where did you find them?" Kirk asked.

"Explain them, MacCormick. Which one is this?" He held up a negative to the light.

"That's the test shot."

We all pressed close and peered at the clear, sharp negative in black and white; we could distinguish easily each model, each piece of china and silverware.

"Nothing unusual, is there?" Robert Yorke asked.

"No," Wyatt said. "Now, let's look at the final shot."

It was not so distinct as the other. We had to strain our eyes to make out the people and the objects. The sound that came from Julie was almost a sob.

"Yes, Miss Taylor?" Wyatt prompted.

"The knife," Julie said softly.

"Yeah!" May shouted. "It's gone!"

"That's right," Wyatt said. "The knife—it's gone."

Kirk snatched the plates from Wyatt's hands. "It must be there!

It couldn't . . ." He gave the plates back to the detective. "Yes, it's missing."

"And that means," Wyatt said grimly, "that the knife was taken after the test shot, not after the final one. The murderer took it then, hid it some place, and, after the last picture, used it. And that, MacCormick, smashes the alibi your pal Duerr gave you all to hell."

"Maybe," Lockhart said, "his pal Duerr will give him another alibi for when the knife was really taken."

"What were you doing then, MacCormick? Can you prove you didn't take the knife then?"

"I don't know," Mac said. "I just . . . I don't think so."

"Of course he can't!" Julie said. "Who can? Everybody was in and out of the studio, moving all around and . . ."

"If everybody will sit down," Wyatt interrupted, "we'll see. And this time we'll be more systematic. Lockhart, MacCormick could have taken the knife. Put a little star after his name."

Wyatt watched his assistant's pencil move across a pad; then he turned his attention to Robert Yorke: "Now, Mr. Yorke, what did you do after the test negative?"

The actor leaned forward in his chair, but his attitude was one of interest rather than strain. "Let me see. Mrs. Troy, May, and Lee and I had a cigarette together. Then I

wandered about. Finally, I went to my dressing-room and waited there until we were called for the final shot." He smiled with charming frankness and leaned back.

"A star for Mr. Yorke, Lockhart."

The smile and charm dropped from Yorke at once. "I didn't take that knife! I can prove it!" He turned to May Ralston. "On the way to my dressing-room, I passed Miss Ralston in the corridor. May, tell them. Was I in possession of that knife?"

May smirked. "Well, he wasn't wearing it on his lapel. But, of course, he might have had it tucked under his coat."

"May, I'm being suspected of murder," Yorke said.

"Look; if I saw you with the knife I'd say so. It'd prove I didn't take the thing."

Wyatt drawled, "Can you prove it any other way, Miss Ralston?"

"No. Give me one of your damn stars. Make it a gold one!"

Kirk laughed. "Give me four."

Wyatt turned to him sharply: "Go on, Findlay; explain."

"Just like everyone else, I was all over the place in those ten minutes. I could have taken the knife."

"Now, Kenyon," Wyatt said, "how about you?"

Lee smiled pleasantly at the detective. "I could have taken it. Very easily. But I didn't. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. Duerr, you? What did you do and where were you?" The phone buzzed, and Wyatt snatched it up. He listened; then said, "Send her in."

An officer in uniform escorted Erika MacCormick through the big double doors, then returned to his post in the reception-room. Erika's lovely opaque eyes moved slowly over our collective faces. She tried to smile, and the delicate, rather thin lips trembled in the effort.

Instantly, Mac was on one side of her, Kirk on the other. They brought her over to our semicircle and sat her between them. No policeman was going to get tough with their Erika.

"Mrs. MacCormick," Wyatt began.

Erika interrupted him in her low, almost drawling voice. "Please," she said, "let's not have the preliminaries. I'm not a child. My aunt was murdered here tonight. I fully understand that now, and so . . . so please go on from there."

"Thank you," Wyatt said. "Mrs. MacCormick, how did you spend the evening?"

"I had dinner with some friends. At a little place on Forty-sixth Street. We were a very congenial group, and we stayed there, talking, until one of your men found me."

"You were there all evening?" Wyatt asked.



"Just as I said. I'm sure my friends will prove it for you."

"I'm sure they will. Mrs. MacCormick, are you familiar with the contents of your aunt's will?"

"Yes. My aunt made me very conscious of the fact that I was to be her heir. Conscious of the re-

sponsibility, and all that sort of thing."

"You are her sole heir?"

Both Kirk and Mac leaned forward to protest his insinuation, but Erika laid a hand on each of their arms and answered the question quietly: "Yes. There are no other relatives."

"I see."

"And do you see," Erika said calmly, "that I can prove that I was nowhere near this studio all evening?"

"Please don't misunderstand me." Wyatt paused. Then he turned to Mac: "Mr. MacCormick, how's business?" Mac's reaction caused him to go on: "I can find out some place else, if you'd rather."

Mac hesitated; then said, "Business is lousy. I'm broke."

Our surprise was real, but it was obvious that Wyatt's was feigned. "You'd never know it! You couldn't have spent more money on this studio if you'd tried."

"That's what broke me."

"You could use some money to save your business?"

Mac knew well enough what his interrogator was getting at. "No, Mr. Wyatt; you're wrong. The murder of Isabelle Fleming doesn't get me—through my wife—the money I need. On the contrary, it finishes me up for good."

"What do you mean?"

"After we took the picture this afternoon, Erika's aunt promised

to lend me thirty thousand dollars. And she was going to give it to me tomorrow. It will be months before Erika gets any of her aunt's three millions. That will be too late. So you see, Mr. Wyatt," Mac added grimly, "I don't have a motive, after all."

"Mrs. Fleming promised you thirty thousand dollars? Hm-m. Can you prove that?"

"I don't know—Mrs. Fleming and I were alone when we discussed it."

"Of course you can prove it, Mac!" Julie crossed to Mac's side and then swerved to face Wyatt. "Of course he can! Or, rather I can do it for him!"

"That would be being a good little secretary," Wyatt said tersely.

"When I got here tonight—I was late—Mac was all excited and happy. The first time in a long while." Her words were tumbling all over one another. "He said to me, 'Julie, everything's going to be all right! Aunt Isabelle's going to finance us. We're set now!' He said, 'I'll give you a raise—I might even give you your back pay!' There! Doesn't that prove it?"

Wyatt was watching Julie with a quizzical smile. He liked her; you could see that. But he wasn't to be taken in by her sweet young earnestness. He looked at Kirk.

"Findlay," he asked, "did Mac-

Cormick tell you about his loan, too?"

A lightninglike flash of uncertainty trembled in Kirk's eyes. To anyone unfamiliar with his whizzing reactions it might have passed unnoticed. There was only the breath of a pause before he answered, "Sure. The minute he got back to the studio tonight he told me. It was damn' good news!"

Wyatt shook his head hopelessly. "MacCormick, you have wonderful friends. They'd alibi you for anything. Even for that knife they said you couldn't have taken. And you'd still have that alibi, too, if we hadn't found those negatives. But you didn't hide those plates, did you?"

Mac jumped to his feet. Julie and Kirk and Harry swarmed around the desk, protesting loudly.

Wyatt yelled them down. "That's all for now, folks. We'll keep in touch with you. Don't go far away. Good night and sleep tight. All but MacCormick. You stick around for a while, will you?"

IV

THE MOMENT WE were paroled from Photo Arts I lit out for home and Jeff. I wanted to tell him all about everything, and then have him reassure me that Ralph MacCormick was not a murderer.

Usually I was one for standing enraptured as dawn's early light

chased the black gloom out of New York. But not this dawn. I hailed a cab and climbed in.

We were pulling away from the curb when I spied Jeff. He was standing in the middle of the sidewalk across the street, looking up toward the fifty-third floor of the Graylock Building. I could see his lips move as he put the Troy curse on all and sundry who were keeping him from being up in Photo Arts.

"Jeff!" I shouted.

With him in the cab close beside me and his arm around my shoulders, I let everything go and permitted myself the pleasure of a minor nervous breakdown. Jeff held me closer, murmuring the right things into my ear, and at Fifty-seventh Street I was a well woman again.

"I'm sorry, Jeff," I said. "And thank you for not throwing me out of the cab."

"There's a fine for littering the streets."

Leaning back against his shoulder, I turned my head to inspect him. He was still the same; he hadn't lost his hair since I had seen him last; he hadn't broken out in a rash; his nice nose hadn't been demolished in a street fight and badly set by a tipsy acquaintance. He was all right; not much, perhaps, when you compared him to Einstein or Cary Grant, but he was all I had—my husband.

"The damn' cops wouldn't let

me in the studio," he said. "Tell me all the sordid details, Haila."

We were crossing Seventy-eighth Street when I started with Julie's arrival at the apartment. When I finished, we were sitting on the studio couch in our living-room and it was morning.

"Unless the police know more than you people told them," Jeff said, "they're not going to find out who killed Isabelle Fleming."

"Jeff, you could handle this case better than Wyatt!"

He laughed at me. "Sweetheart! Contrary to public opinion, the cops of New York City are not a bunch of illiterates who flunked out of grade school."

"Jeff . . ."

"No, Haila! I'm not fooling around with any more murder. You know what happened the last time. I lost my job because I was never at the office. An advertising man has to be at the office."

"But you don't have a job now to lose."

"That's good logic, Haila," Jeff admitted, "but I won't find one, either, chasing around looking for a murderer."

"You've been out of work for only a month, darling. And two weeks of that we spent on our honeymoon."

"I remember." We let a silent moment slip by while we had fun remembering. Then Jeff said, "This will probably be my last minute alone with you. From now

on I won't be able to get near you for cops."

"If you worked on the case it would all be over sooner. We could be alone-at-last quicker."

"Haila, don't tempt me! God knows I'd like to go around pretending I'm a detective, chasing murderers. It's a wonderful way to die. But I'm a very mediocre sleuth. I want to support you in a manner to which you are unaccustomed. Wonderful food, wonderful clothing, and wonderful shelter."

"You're being old-fashioned, Jeff."

"Sure. I believe in blood-letting, garters, mother love, and a husband supporting his wife. Even if the husband is me and the wife is you. I'm not fooling around with any more murder. Because I love you."

"And I love you."

"Then it's all settled. No more murder."

The phone rang, and Jeff went into the bedroom to answer it. In a few minutes he was back again, putting on his hat and coat.

"Jeff," I asked. "What is it?"

"Why didn't you tell me that the police are trying to pin it on Mac McCormick?"

"I thought I made that clear," I said.

"You made it clear that Wyatt thinks Mac has a motive and that he had the opportunity. But, from your story, so did everyone else.

You get some sleep. I'll call you about noon."

"Where are you going?"

"Up to see Mac and the boys at Photo Arts. Go ahead—laugh!"

"How can I, Jeff? This means you don't love me."

"I still think you're beautiful. So beautiful that I hope I don't prove you killed Isabelle Fleming. So long, baby."

The giant clock in the Graylock Building's lobby read four on the dot when I rushed past it and squeezed into an elevator. Jeff, deciding that I needed sleep, hadn't phoned me until three.

Julie's cool, green reception-room was empty, but voices drifted through the doors from the studio. I stopped to listen. Jeff, Mac, Kirk, Harry Duerr. And Lieutenant Detective Wyatt. Then the dry tones of Lockhart.

They were all grouped around Wyatt, who had taken up his old post at Julie's desk.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Troy," Wyatt said wearily. "Has your memory been refreshed any since last night?"

"I'm afraid it hasn't."

"Nobody's has. Lockhart and I made the rounds this morning: Nobody remembers anything. Frankly, none of the people connected with this case will ever be cited for honesty."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Jeff said as he crossed the room to my

side, "if even the killer is lying. You know how one thing leads to another."

Wyatt turned to Mac and Kirk, neither of whom looked as if he'd closed his eyes since I had seen him last. "Your pal Troy is a student of human nature."

"Do you find that comes in handy when you dabble in crime, Mr. Troy?" Lockhart asked.

It looked as if Jeff was set for some tough sledding. He grinned at me. "The boys are peeved. They're afraid I'll dabble around and upset some of their theories."

"Mr. Wyatt," I asked, "have you seen Julie Taylor?"

He frowned. "We can't locate her."

I realized then, since the detectives hadn't talked to Julie, that they didn't know yet of her darkroom experience. And I knew I couldn't withhold that evidence any longer.

As quickly and completely as I could, I told Wyatt the story.

"MacCormick!" the Lieutenant snapped. "This seems like news to you!"

"It is!" Mac's mouth was still open.

"You two, Findlay and Duerr. Did you know about this?"

"No . . . uh-huh," Harry said deliberately.

"I'm still in a fog." Kirk turned to me: "Julie thought there was a killer in the darkroom with her, and she didn't tell us!"

"And Julie smashed our plates!" Mac was even more incredulous. "No, it's all wrong. It doesn't make sense."

"Little Julie Taylor," Wyatt mused. "A nice kid. I'd like to have a talk with her. C'mon, Lockhart, we'll find her."

Jeff stopped them. "Mr. Wyatt, that other set of plates. Not the ones that Julie said she smashed—the ones Kirk couldn't locate last night. Where did you find them?"

"Why?"

"They found them in the same wastebasket where we found the smashed afternoon plates," Mac said.

"See?" Wyatt growled. "Anything you want to know, ask Mac-Cormick. He's a pal of yours; he'll probably tell you who killed his wife's aunt. If you're unfair enough to ask him. Let's go, Lockhart."

It was a sorry-looking group that the detectives left behind them. Jeff's eyes moved from Mac to Kirk to Harry, who was sitting in his corner, head in hands.

"Hiya, Harry," Jeff said, more in an attempt to break the heavy silence than anything.

Harry's slow, shy smile appeared for a moment. "Hiya."

Jeff laughed. "You shouldn't use up a whole day's conversation all at once like that, Harry."

"Hey, Mac," Kirk said, "remember the time Harry didn't show up for two weeks, and it

turned out he had been downstairs sending a ten-word telegram?"

"Don't let them kid you, Harry," Mac said. "When Erika told me about you, her big point was that we could use a strong, silent type around here. Emphasis on the silent. If you know what I mean, Kirk."

"I'm glib," Kirk confessed. "That's my cross, and you'll have to bear it."

"Harry," Jeff asked, "how did you meet Erika?"

"My sister went to school with her in Switzerland."

"Switzerland!" Jeff was impressed.

"Sure," Kirk said; "didn't you know? Harry comes from a long line of economic royalists. He used to wallow in luxury in the old days."

"Those days are gone," Harry said, without a trace of regret in his voice. "The Duerrs are working people now."

The phone buzzed sharply, and Mac reached for it. The conversation was short and one-sided; the other side. When Mac hung up, he said, "Erika's up at the Fleming house. I was supposed to meet her there. I forgot. Arrangements to make."

We watched Mac drag out of the studio. This business was beginning to get him.

"Kirk!" Jeff said suddenly. "Those negatives. You should

have found a better place to hide them."

Kirk's eyes opened wide. "You . . . you knew about that?"

"Sure," Jeff grinned. "Wyatt sent you to the darkroom to get those negatives. You saw that when the final shot had been taken the knife was no longer on the table. You knew that knocked Harry's alibi for Mac all to hell. So you tried to get rid of the plates. But you didn't have time to do a good job. Right?"

"Right," Kirk said miserably. "I would've smashed them, but that would have made too much noise. So I hid them. I thought I'd get a chance later to really get rid of them. Look, Jeff; don't tell Mac. He's sore at Julie and Harry and me now for trying to help him. He says it makes him look more suspicious."

"It might."

"The whole thing's crazy! Why would Mac kill Isabelle Fleming? She promised him that loan, I know she did!"

Kirk hadn't been that positive last night when Wyatt had questioned him about the loan; I remembered his brief hesitation before he answered.

"I believe it, Kirk. But a word of advice from an incompetent friend, son: It's being a good pal, but it's also illegal to destroy evidence."

"I wish I'd swallowed the damn' things."



Findlay covered up quickly as the doors at the end of the studio swung open. Robert Yorke stood waiting for our attention to make his entrance. It was easy to imagine how female hearts had pitter-pattered when he stepped onto a stage.

Yorke smiled and bowed ever so slightly, but ever so suavely, before he moved toward us. He came easily, jauntily, his hand outstretched. A matinee idol without a matinee.

"How do you do, Mrs. Troy?" He took my hand and lingered over it. He made me feel like a girl again. "And this is your husband?" he said, turning to Jeff. "How are you?" His manner had changed from romantic to I'm-just-one-of-the-boys.

"I'm glad to know you, too, Yorke." Jeff was shaking his hand, smiling. You couldn't help liking

this man, although you knew he had planned it that way; that that was his business.

"Hello, Yorke," Kirk Findlay said.

Yorke smiled a refusal of Jeff's proffered cigarettes and drew an expensive gold case from his pocket. I was standing close enough to notice that his cigarettes were one of the cheapest brands.

"You're a detective, aren't you, Troy?" he said. "I've heard about you from an actress friend of mine. You're very good, I understand."

Jeff's grin was a masterpiece of deprecation. "Mac asked me to help the police on this murder and . . ."

"Oh, yes, the police! How are they getting on?" Yorke asked casually.

"I'm afraid Wyatt's going to need more help than I can give him," Jeff said. Then he smiled. "I suppose, being a detective, I should ask you some questions, Yorke."

"I'd be delighted."

"Are you married?"

The actor's eyebrows rose at Jeff's bluntness, but he smiled—a smile of nonresentment. "At the moment, no."

"You have been?"

"Oh, yes. Once or twice. Marriage didn't agree with me. Why do you ask?"

Jeff shrugged. "I don't know.

It's the only question I could think of."

"A very good one, Mr. Troy." Yorke turned to Kirk: "MacCormick isn't here, is he?"

"No."

"I just dropped in as I was passing to see if you had anything for me."

"I don't think we'll be taking any pictures for a little while," Kirk said. "We're not in the mood."

"Well, I really must rush away. Nice seeing you all, and good luck, Troy."

Then he was gone. Robert Yorke also knew how to make an exit.

"If you want to talk to him some more, Jeff, I'll haul him back here," Kirk said.

"I'll see him again. Call Julie Taylor for me, will you?" Jeff said.

Kirk swung the dial and held the receiver to his ear for a long time before he slapped it down. "No answer yet."

"Did you expect her here today?"

"Well—not especially after the siege we all went through last night, but . . ."

"But you sort of thought she'd turn up?"

"Yes." Kirk was frowning. "I wonder if I should go down to her place."

"Later. Let's see if we can't get hold of the others. Lee Kenyon

and this May Ralston. I want to see both of them."

Jeff and Kirk went into a huddle around the telephone. Harry, after making sure that he wasn't needed, put on his hat and coat and went out. I curled up on the old horsehair sofa in the corner.

In spite of all my efforts to keep awake my eyelids began to droop. The past twenty-four hours had been too much for me. The last thing I remember was Jeff pulling the heavy drapes across the windows and kissing me on the forehead.

A sharp, metallic sound awakened me. The studio was cold and completely dark. Outside, an elevator door slid back and forth. But in here there was nothing at all—no sound, no movement. And yet that clicking noise that woke me had been. . . .

I sat up, trying to remember where the light switch was.

The clicking sound that I had heard before came again now. Four or five times.

"Jeff!" I called. "Jeff! Kirk!"

My answer was a darting move close by the blacked-out windows. There was someone in the room with me. Not Jeff, not Kirk. Someone who wasn't too enthusiastic about my knowing of his identity.

"Hey!" I shouted. "Hey!" Then I felt the swift brushing as someone sped past me, and a sudden gush of cold air told me that the

studio doors had opened and closed.

With my hands extended before me I ran to where I knew the doors must be and pushed against them. I felt for the corridor light and snapped it on. There was no one there. I picked up my handbag and rushed through the reception-room and out into the big main hall. It, too, was deserted.

I was turning back into Photo Arts again when I noticed it. Halfway down the hall a door was settling with snaillike slowness into its frame. It was through the door then that my friend had gone.

Running to it, I pushed it open, and found myself on the landing of a stairway. There was no one in sight. I stood still, straining my ears for footsteps. The big door wheezed closed, but there was no other sound.

I had taken three steps down when a most unpleasant thought stopped me in my tracks: What if my newly formed acquaintance was waiting for me just around the bend in the stairs?

Suddenly I lost all desire to meet any more people. I pivoted, and went back up to the door and pressed against it. It didn't budge. I grabbed the knob and pulled. And at that moment I realized what I had done.

I had locked myself in that stairway. This door and every other door on the eighty-two floors of the whole Graylock Building

were locked for the night. Not from the building side; fire laws prevented that. But from my side there wouldn't be an open door between the bottom and the pin-nacled top of the building.

Nice work. I had locked myself in an eighty-two-flight fire escape with—with, perhaps, the murderer of Mrs. Fleming. Quite suddenly this floor no longer appealed to me.

I began to run—up and up, stumbling and floundering and fighting for my breath.

And then I couldn't go up any more. Every muscle in my body went on a sit-down strike. I collapsed on the cold cement stairs. Let the murderer catch up with me. Any end was better than this.

I listened intently. Nothing. Maybe my murderer couldn't run very fast and it would take him a long time to arrive. I could wait. I had time.

My breathing had become as normal as it would ever again be, and still no footsteps. A horrible realization struck me. I wasn't being chased, at all!

The murderer must have been as frightened as I. He must have pattered down those steps as fast as his little feet would carry him. By now he was having a soda in the drugstore. And I . . . where was I?

I pulled myself up to the landing. It was the fifty-eighth floor. Fifty-eight flights of steep, hard

steps to the bottom and twenty-nine to the top. I had to make my choice; up or down. Up was certainly tougher . . . but down was exactly twice as far. I couldn't see much difference, so I started up.

Each flight grew steeper as I trudged it. My throat was parched and I was wheezing at the sixty-ninth floor. I wondered what time it was. I wondered who was president now. I wondered if the Graylock Building kept a staff of St. Bernards.

At the seventy-fifth floor, tears started streaming down my cheeks, and I began to pray. Oh, God! What if that door was locked!

It was by sheer force of character that I prevented myself from slipping over the brink into stark, raving madness. I got a grip on myself; I composed myself. I stumbled frantically up the last flight and fell against the door. It swung open, and I was free. The world was mine!

When the elevator arrived the operator looked at me curiously. "I didn't know there was anyone left on this floor," he said. "How'd you get up here?"

"I walked," I said.

He laughed heartily.

V

JEFF AND I had covered three of Greater New York's five boroughs in an attempt to place May Ralston, Robert Yorke, and Harry

Duerr at the scene of the crime that had been perpetrated against my health and dignity at Photo Arts that early evening.

They presented us unanimously with enthusiastic, but uncheckable, alibis. Between five and six May had been at home—alone—doing her nails. Robert Yorke had been keeping fit by walking briskly around the reservoir in Central Park—alone.

And Harry Duerr had spent that hour taking pictures in Times Square. He hadn't been alone precisely, but there was no one to establish his alibi.

Lee Kenyon and the Barrel Room on Sullivan Street was our next stop. I gingerly placed my dying feet on one of the folding seats in our cab. Jeff was too preoccupied to throw any sympathy in my direction, so I groaned emphatically.

"Haila," he said, "you didn't even get a glimpse of that person?"

"No, and I never want to see him again."

"That clicking sound. Can't you describe it at all?"

"Jeff, it was just a . . . just a scratchy . . ."

"Did it sound like somebody tapping a pencil against his teeth?"

"It might have been a coin against a window or . . . Jeff, I really don't know! It just clicked, that's all."

"If only Kirk and I had come

back to the studio a little sooner!"

"I would have loved that. Then the four of us could have played some bridge."

"Now, if you'd been smart, Haila, and had torn a button off your guest's coat as he passed by you . . ."

Fortunately for Jeff the cab pulled up in front of the Barrel Room. I crawled out while he paid the fare.

Under the glass cases that lined each side of the garishly colored entrance to the Barrel Room were photographs of the night club's current attractions. Various gals in various stages of dishabille smiling coyly over their bared shoulders.

A dusky young lady with a long bob and big black eyes billed as "The Polka Girl." A trio of sleek young men with shiny trumpets, known as "The Three Swinging Fools." And Lee Kenyon in a Paul Draper pose, under the heading, "Tapper Extraordinaire."

At the bottom of the steps we were met by the wailing of a band. The Polka Girl was taking her cue as we entered, and the accompaniment quieted to a throb as her strangely unmusical voice raised itself in a dare to all the uncortorted males in the surrounding gloom. She gave; she raffled off her soul.

By the time we had groped our way to a table and our drinks had arrived, Lee Kenyon was in the



midst of his number. It was certainly tapping *extraordinaire*.

The Polka Girl had had only a pin point of light upon her; Kenyon had a large white spot. But even that couldn't keep up with him. Often it lost him entirely and went sweeping frantically around the room to locate him. During

one of its more far-flung jaunts Jeff nudged me.

"What, Jeff?"

He half rose and peered across the room.

"Jeff, what is it?"

"Over there. To the left of the band. Third table from the— What the—?"

The wandering spotlight was abruptly quenched in its chase after Lee. The place was in total darkness. Near me, a familiar voice exploded in a curse. It was followed by the tinkling of a breaking glass and the crash of overturned chairs. Then a moment's unexpected silence as the whole place quieted simultaneously.

I reached out, and felt nothing. Jeff's chair was empty.

I heard that familiar voice again, this time in a groan. There was the heavy thudding sound of a body falling.

The lights flashed on.

The night club was fully illuminated now, by naked bulbs on the ceiling. The glare made me blink, not, however, before ascertaining that Jeff had completely disappeared from view.

When I managed to open my eyes again, I saw him. He was sitting on the floor at the edge of the dancing space. His hands were cupped about his chin and he was moving it experimentally.

I side-stepped through the tables to him, getting there just in

time to help the headwaiter and a couple of his men help him to his feet.

Jeff brushed us all aside and bolted for the stairs. I met him on his way back down. Still rubbing his jaw, and ignoring my questions, he headed for our table and beckoned a waiter.

"A double rye," he said. "Straight."

The overhead lights had been extinguished and the Barrel Room was once again plunged into its seductive twilight.

"Jeff, what did happen?"

"I got hit."

"By whom? And why?"

"By someone who didn't want me to hold on to him until the lights came back on and I could see who he was. He was sitting over there."

I looked in the direction Jeff had indicated. At a table against the far wall, sitting alone, was Erika MacCormick.

"Erika!" I explained. "What's she doing here? And alone!"

"Nice, quiet place to mourn. C'mon."

Erika watched our approach with smiling indifference. Her waiter lifted two empty Old-Fashioned glasses from the table and set a full one before her. She raised it to her lips and fluttered long, gold-tipped lashes at Jeff.

"Are you hurt, Jeff?" She was amused.

"A headache. And you'll have

one, too, if you keep on drinking Old-Fashioneds."

"It's only my second."

"Third," Jeff corrected pleasantly.

"No." She glanced at him sharply and frowned. "Oh, yes; my mistake. Third."

"Second," Jeff said. "Who had the other one?"

"Let's not play games." She turned to me: "This isn't a very nice place to bring a husband, Haila. I'm surprised."

Jeff said, "You wouldn't bring yours here, would you, Erika? Or did you?"

Erika smiled too sweetly. "Mac's working. I was just about to call him and ask him to pick me up. I wanted to see a new routine that Lee's doing this week."

"Oh." The conversation lapsed until Jeff said, "Erika, where were you about five-thirty this evening?"

"I'm not interested in answering your questions, Jeff. Frankly, I don't approve of your meddling in this case."

"I'm sorry, Erika."

Again the conversation took a nose dive. Erika refreshed her make-up; she was having no more of us. Jeff motioned to a pasty-faced young man tinkering with a spotlight.

"Hey!" Jeff said.

"Me?" The young man came to our table.

"Did your spot break down?"

"Naw. It's all right. The plug just came out." He pointed to a floor plug between Erika and the empty chair beside her.

"Oh," Jeff said. "Too bad it spoiled Kenyon's new number."

"What new number! That guy ain't had a new number in six months!"

"Thanks," Jeff said.

The young man went back to his business. Jeff was smiling at Erika. "The floor plug just came out and Kenyon doesn't have a new number."

Erika stood up, drawing her coat around her shoulders. "I think it was ridiculous of Mac to bring you into this. You're going to do him more harm than good. And I shall tell him so!"

We watched her slip through the now jammed room.

"Jeff," I said. "All that devastating innuendo! Erika's escort pulled out the light plug?"

"Yeah. He saw me before I saw him. I just caught a glimpse of dark blue shoulder as he ducked behind the table to pull out the plug. If only I had held on to him!"

"Or snatched a button off him as he passed, darling!"

"All right, darling! Let's go back and see Kenyon."

A waiter led us through an end of the kitchen and down a dirty corridor filled with shivering chorus girls awaiting their cue. Raising both hands high above his head, Jeff plunged through them.

"Gee, a gentleman!" the only brunette said, in an awed voice. "How'd he get in the Barrel?"

Robert Yorke was standing in the middle of Lee Kenyon's little cubbyhole of a dressing-room. Squares of white fluttered to the floor as he angrily tore up a sheet of paper.

"My charming young friend, Lee Kenyon!" he growled.

"What's wrong?" Jeff asked.

Robert Yorke grimaced. "I was to meet him here. But, instead, I find a note. It seems that Kenyon and I are no longer sharing an apartment. It also seems he has not only surreptitiously moved out on me, but he has also quit his job here. As of now! Won't I drop in and see him some time at the Marcy Towers?"

Yorke snatched up his hat. "Won't I, though!"

"As of now?" Jeff asked.

"Yes! How does he get this way, the little . . . ?"

Yorke strode out of the room. Jeff sat on the edge of the table and looked at me.

"Hm-m-m, he said. "How *does* Kenyon get this way? From a job at the Barrel Room to a suite at the Marcy Towers."

I boosted myself up on the table beside Jeff, and he slung his arm around my shoulders. "You'd like to go home now, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, frankly. Home is where the rubbing alcohol is."

"C'mon; we'll take a cab."

"Oh, no, we won't." I put my foot down firmly, although the pain shot clear up to my hip. We had already spent too much money. We left the Barrel Room and walked toward the subway.

In front of a drugstore, Jeff stopped. "Just a second. I've got to call Mac."

"All right. I'll have a soda."

The counterman had just put my drink before me when Jeff came bursting out of the phone booth. "Julie's gone. She left town this morning."

"Left town!"

"That's what the police say."

"But, Jeff, she wouldn't do that! Why, that's running out on us. She's been kidnapped or—something! You know Julie! She wouldn't . . ."

"We'll see whether she would or not," Jeff said grimly. . . .

Julie's apartment on Irving Place was one of those quaint old buildings left over from the nineties. Its elevator, an elaborate gilded cage, should have been turned out to pasture with Man o' War. Fred, the operator, was an old pal of mine, and he grinned wildly when he spied us.

"Miss Taylor's disappeared!" he shouted. "There've been cops around here all day!"

"Were you here when she left?" Jeff asked.

"You bet! She came in about five this morning, and went right

back out again. She had a suitcase with her."

"Did she take a cab?"

He nodded. "She took Kenny Robert's cab. He keeps it out front here."

"Where'd he take her?"

"To the station. He let her out in front of it." Fred shook his head sadly. "Kenny's pretty broke up about it. You see, I got a theory that he's secretly in love with Miss Taylor. He lets her run up a bill in his cab. And that's love, if you ask me!"

"Everybody likes Julie," Jeff said.

"Sure, they do. She makes people feel good. She's got more friends in this here building—even Miss Frost. Why, she's her best friend, I guess. And everybody else hates Miss Frost. And she hates them."

"Where's Miss Frost's apartment?" Jeff asked.

"Right across from Miss Taylor's. But she won't talk to you," Fred added.

"We'll talk to her."

He gave us a doubtful look. "Get in," he said, with deep foreboding. "But after passengers get out of my car I ain't responsible for their safety."

Jeff had been knocking stubbornly for a full three minutes before Miss Frost finally flung open her door.

"Come in!" she commanded. "Before the turtles get out!"

"Turtles?" Jeff inquired politely.

"Yes, turtles!" Miss Frost snapped, not unturtlelike herself.

She was a stocky little woman of perhaps forty-five, with salt-and-pepper-colored hair, a severe nose, and a remarkably determined chin. Her eyes, however, were a soft brown. "Sit down, since you're here! I hate people standing about!"

I eased myself gingerly onto the edge of a davenport, and Jeff was about to plop into a plump old Morris chair, when Miss Frost shouted, "No, young man! Do you want to squash Philadelphia?"

Jeff examined the chair. "But I—I don't see Philadelphia."

"No? Oh, no; that's right. He's in the bathroom with the others."

"How many do you have, Miss Frost?" Jeff asked.

"Are you merely making conversation or are you interested in turtles?"

"I'm very fond of turtles," Jeff said. "Where did you get them all?"

"Relatives!" she said unhappily. "They've been sending them to me for years. It started with the Boston Exposition, thirty years ago. And now every time anyone goes anywhere I get a turtle. They think I'm collecting them. The idiots!"

A large turtle entered from the bathroom.

"Is that Philadelphia?" I asked.

"No. That's San Francisco.

Now, young man, what do you want of me?"

"We're friends of Julie's and we—" Jeff stopped. He was staring at the doorway. A trio of terrapins were entering in single file.

"Pittsburgh, Detroit, and New York!" Miss Frost announced; then went on, "I can't tell you a thing about Julie Taylor, young man. I didn't even know she had gone until I found her note under my door this morning."

"What note? May I see it, please?"

"You may not! St. Louis ate it. It wouldn't have helped you, anyway. It just asked me to tell the cleaning woman whom we share on Thursdays that she would be out of town this week."

"But she didn't say where—?"

"That's all she said. Here comes Paris!"

"Paris, France?" There was admiration in Jeff's voice.

"Naturally!"

"You'd never know it. He looks as American as the others." Jeff picked up his hat. "I'm sorry for bursting in on you so late, Miss Frost, but we're worried about Julie. We want to find her."

"And so do I," Miss Frost said. "I'm very fond of Miss Taylor."

Outside in the corridor, while we were waiting for the elevator, Jeff said, "Haila, you go home and soak feet. I'm going up to the studio and talk to Mac."

"I'll go with you."

"You should get some rest, sweetheart."

"There's nothing for me to rest on that doesn't hurt. I want to go with you."

VI

WE FOUND Mac MacCormick sprawled out on the horsehair sofa and Kirk pacing from one end of the studio to the other. When he saw us, he stopped dead in his tracks.

"Have you found Julie?" he demanded.

Jeff shook his head.

"Neither have I." Kirk sat on the edge of the desk, and his face screwed up in an attempt at a smile. "The New York police can't find her, but me, I think I can. So I traipse all over town talking to people. And looking behind things. No soap."

"Did you see the turtle woman?" Jeff asked him.

"Miss Frost? Sure; first place I went. Julie's had her here to the studio several times. We're bosom pals."

"Julie left a note with her," Jeff said, "calling off her cleaning woman for this Thursday. Today's Tuesday. That means Julie left under her own power and expected to be gone until Thursday, at least. Not that that means anything much."

Kirk shook his head. "She didn't just run out. Something or

someone's made her go. And, if anything's happened to Julie—" His voice rose threateningly.

Mac said, frowning, "I don't get it. It isn't like Julie, none of this. First she holds out on us when somebody makes a lethal pass at her in the darkroom. Then she says she smashed our plates. And she disappears."

Mac stopped speaking and watched Jeff. "What are you looking for, Jeff?"

"A clicking sound." He halted his aimless meandering and sat down. "Mac, Haila and I had a little talk with Erika this evening."

"I know. She just called me. I'm sorry, Jeff."

"About me getting socked?" Jeff asked.

"That and—well, and the way Erika acted."

Jeff got up and wandered over to the paper-cup machine and punched it. He was filling a cup the second time when a clatter of high heels swung our attention to the other end of the studio.

Soft baby curls dripped down May Ralston's forehead from an off-the-face number of forget-me-not blue. Her eyes were wide and provocative.

"My hatbox," she cooed. "I forgot to take it home last night. I saw the lights up here as I was going past."

"Isn't it pretty late for you to be going past?" Kirk asked.

"It's only eleven-thirty."



"How did you know these were our lights?" Mac said.

May was indignant. "I can count up to fifty-three! Hello, Jeff!" She perched herself on the edge of the desk and expertly crossed her legs. "You know, I held out on you when you were talking to me tonight. I'm only telling you now because I trust you."

She paused dramatically. "I'm not related to Mrs. Isabelle Fleming in any way whatsoever!"

"Who said you were?"

"Nobody yet! But the police will

connect me with the crime just as soon as they find out that my middle name is Fleming."

"Hm-m," Jeff said significantly.

Harry Duerr came through the door, and unobtrusively joined us when he saw a conference was in progress.

"Yes," May went on, "but, honest, I'm not related to her. I called my mother long distance in Baltimore, and she says the Fleming stands for May Fleming. May Fleming used to be my mother's partner in vaudeville before it died. My mother named me after her for purely sentimental reasons. May Fleming was married to my father when my mother met him."

"Hm-m-m," Jeff said again.

May slid abruptly off the desk. "You don't believe me! I knew you wouldn't! Well, I'm not going to stay here and be convicted of murder just because my middle name is a coincidence!"

May Fleming Ralston stormed out. The angry popping of her heels was terminated by a slamming door.

"She forgot her hatbox again," Jeff said.

"You shouldn't have frightened her," I told him.

"The only thing May's frightened of is that she won't be suspected. And won't get her picture in the paper."

Harry Duerr moved over to us. "Jeff!" he said suddenly. "Jeff, I just thought of something and I

came right down. I hoped you'd be here. I don't want to get anyone in trouble, but . . ."

Mac said, "C'mon, Harry; you're among friends."

"Well, it's probably silly, but this morning I ran an errand for Erika—up to the Fleming house. I stopped to talk to Mrs. Fleming's secretary, and she told me something about Lee Kenyon."

"Kenyon?"

"Yes, but don't get excited, Jeff. It's nothing much. Just that he visited Mrs. Fleming last Saturday afternoon."

"Two days before the murder," Jeff said slowly.

"No, wait! Not that it makes any difference, but it wasn't in the afternoon; it was in the morning. The secretary told me that just before she left for the bank she had heard the butler announce a Mr. Lee Kenyon to see Mrs. Fleming." Harry smiled. "Deduction, see? Banks close at noon on Saturdays."

"And was Kenyon still there when she got back?"

"I don't know, Jeff. I'm sorry."

"What's that secretary's name, Mac?"

"Helen Thompson."

"I'm going to use the phone in the reception-room."

When Jeff came back he made straight for his hat and coat.

"Jeff," I said, "what goes on?"

"A visit to Lee Kenyon." He thought for a moment; then said,

"Harry, can you come along with me? I might need you."

"I'm coming, too," Kirk said. "This studio haunts me. C'mon, Mac!"

Mac shook his head. "No, thanks."

Harry and I turned instinctively from the Graylock Building toward the bus stop, but Kirk, the spendthrift, would have none of that. He explained that by dividing the cab fare by four it would only triple the price of a bus.

"Furthermore," he concluded convincingly, "it isn't fair for Jeff and Harry and me to ride busses. That means three women don't get seats."

TWENTY-FIVE minutes later there was more than a little consternation in our ranks when the door to Lee Kenyon's elaborate suite was opened by Detective Lockhart, who bowed us graciously into the room. Behind him stood Wyatt.

Kenyon, himself, didn't seem at all perturbed by the visiting police. He was cheerfully unpacking. "Hello, all of you!" he chirped. "Try and find a place to sit down. Just try!"

"Sorry to break up a party," Jeff said.

Wyatt cut him short. "We'll dispense with small talk," he said. "Troy, why are you here?"

Jeff grinned. "I'm broke. And I thought maybe Kenyon could tell

me where he got all his money, so me and my friends could go and get some."

Kenyon flipped open a suitcase. "What money?"

Jeff glanced around the room. "Money for new clothes and new luggage. Money to quit your job at the Barrel Room and move from Eighth Avenue to the Marcy Towers."

"Get even more to the point, Troy," Wyatt ordered.

"All right! Kenyon, you visited Mrs. Fleming Saturday morning. While you were there her secretary handed her ten thousand dollars. The ten thousand wasn't around when her secretary went through her things after the murder. I think you have that money. Why?"

Lee opened his mouth and then closed it again. He sank down on a chair.

"Well, Kenyon?" Lieutenant Wyatt asked.

Suddenly Kenyon began to laugh. It was genuine, hearty laughter.

"We're waiting!" Lieutenant Wyatt snapped.

"But it's funny, it's really funny. You see, Isabelle Fleming sent for me on Saturday. I had no idea why. Except for meeting her once or twice casually with Erika, I didn't know the woman. The moment I stepped into her study she informed me that she knew all about me and Erika."

"What about you and Erika?" Kirk demanded.

Kenyon shrugged. "I didn't know, myself, until Mrs. Fleming let me in on it. It seems that Erika had told her she intended to divorce Mac and—"

Harry Duerr was on his feet. "Erika divorce Mac! What are you talking about!"

Kirk was seconding him: "Erika intended—you're crazy!"

Kenyon smiled at them. "I'm simply reporting my interview."

"Get on with it," Wyatt said.

"Erika, it seems, had fallen in love with someone else and was going to marry him. The old lady was furious. And Erika made her even more furious by refusing to tell who her new husband was to be. Mrs. Fleming threatened to disinherit her, but Erika just laughed. Then, somehow, Isabelle decided that it was I Erika meant to marry.

"She was livid at the thought of her niece marrying a tap dancer, let alone the scandal of a divorce. So, failing to dissuade Erika, she sent for me and offered me ten thousand dollars if I promised never to see her again."

"And you took the money," Wyatt said.

Lee smiled jauntily. "Sure."

Kirk's face was dark with anger. "Erika never meant to divorce Mac! And she never meant to marry you!"

Lee Kenyon interrupted: "Of

course, I never meant to marry her. Nor she me. So it was no hardship to promise her aunt that I wouldn't. It was the easiest money I ever hope to earn."

"What made Mrs. Fleming decide you were the man?" Jeff asked.

"I don't know. We've been together a great deal, Erika and I, of course. But that was only because she believed in me, she thought I had talent."

"Then who—?"

"I've no idea. I was so surprised by Isabelle's accusation that I almost didn't accept the money. Listen; if you don't believe that there's nothing between Erika and me but a mutual interest in my dancing, ask her."

"And I suppose she'd tell the truth!" Wyatt jeered. "You know, Kenyon, I'd like it if you could prove you aren't the guy."

"I wish I could accommodate you," Kenyon said. The wrinkles in his forehead were suddenly ironed out. "But I can! Bob Yorke and I shared an apartment for years. He knows all about Erika and me, how often we've been together, how we feel about each other. He'll tell you that I'm not the man. Ask him."

"I will, thanks." The detective crossed the room. "Put Yorke on our calling list, Lockhart." He turned to Jeff: "And you wait in the lobby for me, Troy. I'll be right there."

We stood uneasily in the lobby and stared mutely at Jeff. His fierce scowl of concentration hardly invited the bandying about of words.

"Do you think," Kirk finally dared to say, "that he was telling the truth? About Erika and . . ." He paused, then went on disconsolately, "Mac doesn't know about this. It'll knock him for a loop."

"I don't believe it," Harry said. "Erika and Mac. Why, they're—it isn't true."

"Parts of it are true," Jeff said slowly. "Isabelle Fleming gave Kenyon that money. She did it because Erika meant to divorce Mac, and she was buying off the man she thought was Erika's lover. But whether Isabelle had the right man or not . . . There's only one person who can tell us the truth about that—Erika."

I had grave misgivings on that point. "I don't think she would. I don't think she'd even admit the fact, let alone name the man."

"Oh, God!" Harry said softly. "If it is true, if everything Kenyon said is true, Erika *mustn't* admit it!"

Kirk turned to him bewilderedly: "What do you mean?"

"It will prove conclusively to Wyatt that Mac's guilty! It would to anyone. Erika was going to divorce him. He'll figure it was financial troubles that split them apart. So Mac murdered Mrs. Fleming for her money, not just to

save the studio, but to keep his wife as well!"

Jeff swung around to Kirk. "If Erika and Mac are having trouble," he demanded, "could it be financial?"

"I . . . I suppose so," Kirk answered. "I don't know of anything else it might be."

"I've got to see her." Jeff was frowning furiously. "She's got to see me."

"She won't," I told him. "She considers you unimportant in this case."

"Suppose one of us called her," Kirk said. "Harry or I. If we explained to her how important it is—"

Jeff nodded. "Go ahead, Kirk. Hurry—before Wyatt comes."

Kirk ducked around a corner to the phone booth. In a few minutes he was back. "She's not home," he said dismally. "Look; I better beat it before Wyatt gets down. I'll keep phoning Erika, and when I get her I'll call here and have you paged. I'll persuade her to see you, Jeff, and—"

The two policemen stepped out of an elevator. Kirk sped in one direction and Harry, muttering about going back to the studio, started in the other. Jeff and I moved to meet Wyatt.

"Troy," he said, "I'm taking you and your wife to a little place I know and buying you a drink."

"That's mighty nice of you, but we have to—"

"You don't mean you're refusing my invitation!"

"Well, it's like this—"

Wyatt's eyes narrowed. "You were planning on being busy in the next hour, huh? What were you going to be busy doing?"

"I'd planned to take some spots out of an old vest."

"That can wait. C'mon, Troy. Maybe I'll buy you two drinks."

It wasn't disguised as an invitation any more. Wyatt was a policeman saying he wanted a word with Jeff.

"All right. But Haila—Haila isn't feeling well."

I smiled wanly. "My head—it's splitting."

Wyatt grinned at my headache, but he said, "All right. All we want is Mr. Troy."

Jeff took my arm and guided me to the sidewalk. Wyatt and Lockhart were right behind us. The doorman whistled for a taxi.

"We can't take any chances," Jeff said, his lips barely moving. He put me in the cab. "Go to Erika's. Wait for her. Tell her to keep quiet until I see her. Tell her she's got to, for Mac's sake!"

Lockhart had stopped in the middle of the street. He was staring back at us. In a voice pitched especially for his benefit, Jeff said, "East Ninety-third, driver!"

The cab pulled out. As soon as we had rounded the corner I leaned forward and gave the driver Erika's address. We went

down Fifth Avenue. In front of the quiet elegance of the Stuart Arms Apartments we stopped.

I wasted no time getting into the lobby. The elevators were just beyond the narrow staircase. The operator hadn't taken Erika up yet, he told me, but his colleague could have.

With one hand I went through the motions of knocking at her door, while with the other I experimentally wriggled the knob. To my surprise, it turned. I stepped into the vestibule, a smallish one. There were two doors opening off it; both were closed.

"Erika!" I called. "Erika!"

The door opposite me opened, and Erika stood there. She had already changed into a house coat. In her left hand she held a white portable phone, in her right the receiver, pressed against her cheek. With her eyes on me she moved the mouthpiece to her lips.

'Just a minute, Kirk,' she said into it. "I already have a visitor."

If punctuality counted for anything in this world, I thought, I'd get ahead. Here I was at my appointment while Kirk Findlay was still making it.

I said, "Erika, I've got to talk to you. It's important."

She smiled. "Yes. Kirk's been telling me it was." She inclined her smooth, blonde head toward a door. "Wait for me in the library, will you, Haila? I'll be with you in a second."

Her door closed sharply and I went down a long hall. In the library I plopped into a big, shaggy chair and lit a cigarette in an effort to work up some poise.

An old grandfather's clock in the corner ticked heavily. I moved restlessly about. Why didn't Kirk hang up and let me get this over with? Or had he hung up and was Erika letting me wait?

A door opened and closed, and I scurried back to my seat. I took a deep breath and waited for Erika to float into the room.

Almost a minute passed before I realized that she wasn't coming. That door, then, what had it been? An almost certain knowledge of what had happened dawned on me. Erika didn't care to be talked to by me. She had slipped into street clothes and sneaked away, leaving me stranded in that library.

I started for the door. It opened before I got to it, and Mac stood before me.

"Mac!" I said. "Then it was you who just—"

He wasn't listening to me. He brushed his hand across horror-filled eyes, then teetered drunkenly and caught himself as he half fell across the door sill.

I raced past him and down the long hallway. The door to Erika's room was open now.

She lay across a chair, her head hanging down almost to the floor. Her eyes were wide open, and one

hand was clutching a corner of the rug. There were long, red marks streaking the whiteness of her throat, and a trickle of blood drooled from one side of her mouth.

Things began to revolve in front of me. Circles of telephones, chairs, tables, mirrors, and lamps, Erika's dead body.

Mac's voice, coming faintly from the library, snapped me out of it: "Police headquarters, please! This is Ralph MacCormick. I want to report a murder—the murder of my wife. She has been strangled."

VII

I STOOD IN THE swirling crowd of the Graylock lobby and looked up at its giant clock. It was just noon. The noon following the night of Erika MacCormick's murder. And I remembered how Mac and I had stood listening to a clock's ticking while we waited for the police.

In the room at the end of the hall Erika was no more deathly still than we were as we stood there. And I remembered the police as they had surged in.

Detective Wyatt had made short work of me. He had pummeled me with quick questions, and then brushed me aside to clear the decks for his assault on Mac. Pushed into a corner, I had tried to pull myself together, but

it was more than a one-woman job. Fortunately, Jeff arrived. I felt Jeff's arms around my shoulders, and it was as though he had reached out and gathered all my ebbing strength and brought it back to me.

Then I saw Kirk Findlay, his face dull and grayish, like that of one who had been anesthetized.

"She can't be dead," he kept mumbling. "I just talked to her." He repeated it over and over, with hopeless stubbornness.

"We know you talked to her." Wyatt left Mac to beat at Kirk. "You telephoned her."

"Yes. And Haila was there. I heard her talking to Haila."

"And after that? How much longer did you two talk?"

"A minute or two. Maybe not so long."

"Then you heard her scream," Wyatt barked, "you heard her—"

"No!" Kirk shouted.

"No," I seconded, "she didn't scream. I would have heard it!"

Wyatt smiled, almost malevolently. "Then it might have been her husband who came into the room. That wouldn't have frightened her. She wasn't afraid of him. She didn't know he meant to kill her."

"She didn't scream," Kirk said doggedly. "She wasn't frightened, not while I was talking to her."

He stopped as he understood Wyatt's reasoning. "No, Mac didn't kill her! Mac didn't come in

while I was on the phone. She would have told me. She told me when Haila came in. Someone came in after she hung up. He killed her. He sneaked back out again before Mac came."

"No," Wyatt said. "There wasn't time for that. MacCormick came in minutes after Mrs. Troy."

I pushed my way through the group of men. "You made me say a few minutes. It might have been five or six minutes."

"MacCormick!" Wyatt wheeled from me to Mac. He hammered and hammered at him. The same question over and over until the answer that he wanted came.

As Jeff led me away, I heard Mac saying, "All right; I didn't love Erika." His voice was dead. "I didn't love her, and she didn't love me. Our marriage was a mistake. But I didn't know she meant to divorce me."

Two hours later they had arrested Ralph MacCormick for the murder of his wife and the murder of Mrs. Isabelle Fleming.

JEFF WAS SITTING alone in the big Photo Arts studio. I looked at him anxiously, for it was the first time I'd seen him since he'd helped me up our five flights of stairs the night before, kissed me briefly, and taken the steps down again. He looked remarkably well for not having been near a bed, a bathtub, or a razor in the last thirty-six hours.

"Jeff," I asked, "what about Mac? Is he still—"

He nodded. "Yes. They think they've got him cold."

"Do they have him cold?"

"Not for my money. Mac's innocent."

"That makes two of us for Mac," I said.

"You're not just being the loyal wife? You can vote your own ticket, remember."

"That makes two of us," I repeated.

"Four of us," Jeff said. "There's Kirk and Harry."

"Four of us. Against Wyatt, the Homicide Squad, the District Attorney's office, and the State of New York!"

"Tough goin', huh?" Jeff grinned.

We heard footsteps in the hall, and then Kirk shouldered his way through the doors, walked over to the desk, and plunked down two packages.

"Coffee in that," he said. He stripped the brown paper from the other parcel. It was Scotch, good Scotch.

"One drink of that, Kirk," Jeff told him, "and you'll collapse. What you need is sleep. We'll get Mac out just as soon if you relax for a couple of hours."

"When you relax, I will. Haila, some Scotch?"

"I'll try the coffee first."

"Me, too," Jeff said.

Kirk went to the paper-cup dis-

penser and punched it three times. He brought the cups to the desk and filled his as full with liquor as mine and Jeff's with coffee. He sat on the edge of the desk and stared down at the Scotch in his cup.

"Mac and Julie and I used to drink bourbon. Good, cheap bourbon. Photo Arts was weaned on it. We used to sit around and dream about the day we'd be able to send out for Scotch like this. We all pretended we liked being poor; we even pretended we liked cheap bourbon. Maybe Mac did; he had a sense of taste like an alligator, but Julie and I—" He laughed at himself. "Julie and I, we have a taste for the finer things in life."

"Of course, Kirk. But you and Julie stuck with Mac when—"

"Who wouldn't! Except Erika!" he said bitterly. "I mean— Oh, what the hell! This Cottrell account was going to fix us up. Mac was going places. And what happens? Murder rears its head all over the place."

"Drink, Kirk," Jeff said.

Kirk shook his head. He slowly poured the Scotch back into the bottle and replugged the cork.

"On second thought," he said, "I'll have some coffee." He went to the machine and plinked himself out a cup, then came back and filled it with coffee.

Jeff was staring at the paper-cup dispenser. He crossed the room and punched it. A cup fell on the hook. Then he punched it

again, three times in quick succession.

"Haila!" he shouted.

And like an echo a voice came booming in from the reception-room, a masculine voice: "Anybody around?"

"Kirk!" Jeff said excitedly. "See who it is. Send him away or keep him out there. Don't let him in here. I think I've got something. Hurry!"

Kirk scooted to the double doors and opened one of them an inch; then turned back to us. "It's Yorke, Robert Yorke," he whispered. "I'll take care of him." The doors closed behind him.

"Listen, Haila!" Jeff said. He clicked the cup machine twice again. "Have you heard that noise before?"

"Hundreds of times."

"No. Close your eyes." He banged the machine. "Think."

I thought. And suddenly it was dark. I was here in the studio alone. The sofa in the corner—that's where I had been. A clicking sound had awakened me. I had shouted for Jeff, and the clicking had stopped and a figure had sped past.

"Jeff! Of course! Last night! That person was working the machine."

"How many clicks, Haila?" Jeff asked.

"Oh, five or six that I heard. Or seven or eight."

"Seven or eight. For a drink of

water." Jeff muttered. "A camel, maybe."

He began working the machine furiously; the paper cups piled up on the hook. They had reached halfway up the glass cylinder when he started; they were only a quarter way up when the machine jammed.

Jeff carefully twisted the glass cylinder out of its base and laid it on the floor. Even without their casing the tower of cups balanced itself. One by one Jeff plucked the cups off. A flash of silver caught my eye as he lifted the bottom one. He held up a small tin can.

He removed the cap and put the container under his nose. Then quickly he replaced the top and set the can on the desk.

"It's empty now," he said, "but there was chloroform in it just recently."

"Jeff! The chloroform that Julie smelled in the darkroom! But how . . . how did it get in there?" I demanded.

"And who was trying to get it out? And why couldn't he?" He began walking wide circles around the room.

I sat on the edge of the desk and drummed my heels against its sides. Neither of us spoke. Then Jeff screwed the cylinder back into place.

"Haila!" he commanded. "Take it off again!"

"Why?"

"Because of our beautiful undy-

ing love. And hurry up, or I'll mow you down."

I went to the machine and reached up. I stood on toptoe and tried to turn the cylinder. I stopped and glanced around.

"What are you looking for? Something to stand on?" Jeff sounded more excited than ever. "All right; don't bother!"

He began making his circles again. They grew smaller as he walked faster and faster. Suddenly he smacked both hands together.

"Haila! I know who your visitor was!" Jeff said.

"You do!"

"And even more than that, I think! I hope! Come on; let's go!"

I had to run to catch up with him. As he went through the reception-room, Kirk and Robert Yorke looked up from a pair of dice that were rolling merrily across the velvet green carpet.

We went in and out so quickly that Yorke was too surprised to even greet us. But we caught Kirk's wink and saw him hold up two dollars of what had apparently just been the actor's money.

VIII

THE TURTLES SEEMED a great deal more pleased to see us than Miss Frost did. Jeff's pleasantry about being in the neighborhood and just dropping in went over with a thud.

"How have you been, Miss

Frost?" he asked. His concern was elaborate. "Stiffness all gone out of your lower limbs?"

"My lower limbs!" she was horror stricken at the realization that Jeff knew she had lower limbs.

"Yes, Haila could hardly walk after you two met last night." Jeff sat on the divan and smiled at Miss Frost.

"What are you talking about, young man?" she demanded.

"Yesterday evening, Miss Frost, around six o'clock in the Graylock Building."

"The Graylock Building?"

"Photo Arts. Fifty-third floor. Of course, it was very dark. You and Haila didn't get a good look at each other."

Miss Frost was getting a good look at me now. She said nothing, merely glared.

"It was so dark," Jeff continued, "that you couldn't find anything to stand on to reach the paper-cup machine and take off the cylinder. You got panicky. You started clicking out cups, hoping that what you were after would fall out."

"This is absurd!" Miss Frost said. "What could I possibly be after in—"

"A chloroform can."

"And what would I want with such a thing?"

"You didn't want it; Julie Taylor did."

Miss Frost snorted, and Jeff smiled.

"Julie had to be the one who wanted it," he said. "Anybody else connected with the case could have walked boldly into the studio—they all had an excuse to do that—and wait for the moment when they could sneak out the can. And, if Julie hadn't disappeared, she would have done just that instead of using the more dangerous method of creeping around in the dark for it.

"However, Julie wasn't the creeper, because she would have been recognized and reported to Wyatt by one of his watchers in the lobby. Therefore, Julie must have sent someone else to look for it."

"Possibly," Miss Frost said frigidly, "but what makes you think she sent me?"

"The someone she sent was not tall. Bluntly, Miss Frost, she was short, like you. So short she couldn't reach high enough to remove the glass cylinder."

"Julie has many friends," Miss Frost said even more frigidly. "It may be that she knows someone even shorter than I."

"Could be so," Jeff admitted. "But it also had to be someone with whom Julie could get in touch."

"Since the telephone has been invented, young man—"

"Right, Miss Frost, but there's no one on this earth who was easier for Julie to get in touch with than you."

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

Jeff grinned. "Do you remember telling me about a note that you said Julie left you?"

"Of course I remember!"

"That note you said had been eaten by a turtle?"

Miss Frost rose majestically to her feet. "Young man—"

"But," Jeff rushed on, "turtles don't eat paper. Not even when hungry. They'd rather die than be caught eating paper."

"You are an authority on turtles, I presume!"

It was Jeff's turn now to draw himself to his full height. "It may interest you to know that at Dartmouth, I got a 'C' in a zoology course. Turtles don't eat paper."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "Miss Frost's are different."

"Turtles are alike the world over. I also know that they eat only under water. Not liking paper in the first place, a turtle would hardly take the trouble to drag it under water to consume it.

"All of which leads to the fact that there never was a note. Miss Frost made that up to mislead me. Miss Frost would do anything for Julie, lie for her, go up to Photo Arts for her on a dangerous mission, even—"

Jeff was still speaking as he moved quickly across the room and swung open the bedroom door. Julie Taylor stood there. She was wearing an old corduroy bath-

robe that she held close about her neck with both hands. Her lovely hair was rumpled in a tangly mop. Her face was white and strained.

Miss Frost hurried to her. "I'm sorry, Julie, I—"

"It's all right," Julie said. She tried to smile, but couldn't quite make the grade. "Well, Jeff?"

"Julie, you know Mac's been arrested?"

She nodded. "Yes. I read about it."

"It looks bad for him, Julie." Her lips tightened; she didn't speak. "Julie, you've got to help us prove that Mac isn't a murderer."

"You shouldn't have found me."

Jeff took her hand in his. "Julie you've got to think; think back and remember something that will prove he's innocent."

She tore her hand away. "So that's it! You think that I can help Mac!" She threw back her head, and her laugh was harsh and mirthless. "Listen, Jeff. Listen to me. There's only one thing I can help you prove—that Mac McCormick is guilty of murder."

It was a long time before Jeff spoke: "Then that's why you ran away, Julie. By hiding you thought you could save him."

"Yes. I knew that sooner or later Wyatt would break me down and—and I didn't want to be the one to convict Mac." She shook the sob out of her throat.

"Wyatt would have found you.

He'll realize pretty soon that a smart girl like you wouldn't leave a trail of elevator boys and taxi drivers to testify that she went to the station if she were sneaking away. He'll realize that you doubled back on your trail. Of course, not being an authority on turtles might slow him up, but he'll get here, Julie."

"Yes," she said, "I suppose he will."

Jeff spoke suddenly: "Julie, do me a favor! Tell me everything."

"Anything I tell you will only prove that Mac is guilty." The anguish in her voice sent a chill down my spine.

"Please, Julie," Jeff pleaded.

"All right." Now her voice was dead: "It can't make any difference now. What I told Haila when I went to see her Monday night was true. The darkroom, the chloroform . . . it was all true."

"But you didn't think it had been Mac in the darkroom?"

"No! Oh, no! If I had dreamed it was Mac, I wouldn't have told her. I—well, I went back to help retake the picture. I'd made up my mind to tell Mac and Kirk. I stopped in the reception-room to light a cigarette. I didn't have any matches. Mac's coat was hanging in the closet, and his pockets are always full of kitchen matches. I put my hand in his pocket. There was a chloroform can in it.

"Then I saw what happened. It had been Mac in the

darkroom, Mac who was almost a . . . murderer. You see, I knew how terribly he needed money, lots of it. Money to save the studio, to meet Erika's extravagances. And there was only one way he could get that money—through the death of Isabelle Fleming.

"I could see the whole thing so clearly then. It was Isabelle Fleming he'd been waiting for in the darkroom. I didn't know what to do; I was almost crazy. And then, as I stood there, Mac and Kirk bounced in. I just had time to stuff the can in my pocket.

"They were both so happy. Mrs. Fleming had just promised Mac that she would finance the studio. That changed everything, don't you see? He wouldn't kill her now; there'd be no more attempt at murder. There'd be no reason for it. If I could only get rid of that can and make Haila keep quiet about what I'd told her, no one would ever know what Mac had done.

"I had to hide the can where it would be safe until I could really get rid of it later. So I stuck it in the paper-cup machine."

"And you never got a chance to take it out."

"No, I never got a chance. I tried, but the studio was never empty. And after the murder the police were there. So I sent Miss Frost for it."

Jeff urged her on: "Then, after you'd hidden the can, Julie, Haila

came. And she learned about the broken plates. She thought that meant there'd be another attempt. And she told you, and you—"

"Yes. I told her I'd broken them. I had to, don't you see? I had to keep her from talking about it. I knew that Mac must have smashed them, but I thought that didn't matter, either, now. I believed him, you see, when he told me about Isabelle Fleming's loan. I thought that canceled everything."

"Yes, Julie. We know."

"I was standing there with Haila when I noticed the carving knife was missing. I ran into the hallway and opened Isabelle Fleming's door." Her voice cracked. "I knew then that the loan had been a lie; that Mac said it only to put me off the track in case I had guessed that it was he in the darkroom. I knew then that he had killed her."

Julie sat there looking at us steadily. Tears streamed down her face.

"And then," Jeff said, "you hid, so that you might save Mac. Why, Julie?"

"Because I love him. I loved him long before he married Erika. I still do."

"But Kirk!" I blurted. "I thought that you and Kirk—"

She shook her head. "No. I'm—I'm crazy about Kirk. But it's always been Mac I've loved. Oh, Jeff, what can we do?"

Jeff was frowning at the wall over her head. "Julie, after you left Haila and went back to the studio, who was there?" His voice was strangely urgent.

"Just Mac and Kirk," she said dully.

"How long had they been there?"

"I don't know. Kirk had come back first, I think they said, and Mac only a minute or two after him. They couldn't have been there very long. Mac's slicker was still wet."

Jeff sat bolt upright. "Slicker! Had he worn it to the studio that morning?"

"No. It didn't start raining until about six o'clock. He must have gone home to get it after the picture that afternoon."

Jeff started pacing the floor; he was excited. "Julie, think! After you got to the studio, who came next?"

"Harry, I think. Yes, Harry Duerr. Then-Lee Kenyon."

"And after that?"

"Robert Yorke. I guess he came next. I didn't actually see him arrive. But he came out of his dressing-room all ready for the picture in his dinner clothes."

"And then?"

"May Ralston. And, last of all, Mrs. Fleming."

Jeff swung around and caught Julie's arm. "Listen; you've got to stay hidden for a little while. Slip back into your apartment and

stay there. Don't answer the door except for one of us. Nor the telephone at all. If I call you I'll let the phone ring at least twelve times. Then you can answer it."

Julie was staring at him in hopeless bewilderment. "But why, Jeff? Why? It's no use. Mac doesn't have a chance."

Jeff jerked around sharply as he started out the door. "The hell he doesn't," he said.

After helping Julie move back into her own place, I started for home.

I had taken hardly ten steps away from her apartment house when someone touched me on the elbow. It was Lee Kenyon. He had been drinking, and he looked it.

"Haila," he said stupidly, "I've just heard about Erika. Erika . . . dead." He shook his head from side to side as if to deny his own statement.

"What are you doing here, Lee?"

"Here? I don't know. I've been walking and drinking. Erika's dead! I still can't believe it. She was the most alive person I ever knew. Everything amused her so. Everything. I was looking forward to telling her about the lousy trick her aunt had tried to play on her, and about the trick I'd played on Isabelle. That would have amused her, too."

We walked along Twentieth Street toward Fifth Avenue. Ken-

yon clung insistently to my arm, as if he were afraid I would break away.

"You never did tell Erika about that?" I asked.

"No. I wanted to tell her last night. But Kirk had just called, she said, and he'd made other arrangements for her. You and Jeff were to see her, I think she said. But she would have thought that trick I played was wonderful. And now it's too late. Erika's dead. She would have enjoyed laughing at—" His voice rose, and two women stopped to stare at him.

I had had about enough of his drunken gibberish. Shouting excuses over my shoulder, I made a dash for a Fifth Avenue bus. As I sat down next to a window Kenyon plunked himself beside me. The liquor he had consumed certainly hadn't slowed him down physically.

"I've got some theories on this case, Haila," he said. "And one of them is that the first thing to do is find Julie Taylor. The murderer has Julie Taylor. If we find her, we find the murderer."

"That's right, Lee, I said soothingly.

"I'll find them," he went on. "I'll tear this case wide open. I'll crack it. I'll—"

"Lee, I think you'd better go home and take a nap."

"Where are you going, Haila?"

"I don't know," I lied.

"Let's go to your place and dis-

cuss this thing. Through and through."

Somehow I had to get rid of him. The bus was at Thirty-first Street, just two blocks from the Graylock Building. There was chance that there'd be someone in the studio who could sidetrack Kenyon for me.

"I get off here, Lee," I said.

"Me, too. We've got to stick together, Haila."

But, by the time we reached the Graylock Building, Lee's detective ambitions had dampened somewhat. He walked into the lobby with me, but at the elevators he made an abrupt about-turn.

"I'm going to stop if or a quick one," he said, indicating the bar. "I'll come up to the studio later."

When I walked into the studio and found Kirk and Harry seated on the horsehair sofa staring disconsolately into space, I was glad I had a little note of cheer to broadcast.

"We found Julie!" I said.

Kirk bounced to his feet. "You found Julie! Is she?"—he was almost afraid to say it—"is she all right?"

"Yes. She's been across the hall from her apartment with Miss Frost all the time."

"Thank God," Harry breathed.

"I'm going to see her!" Kirk was combing his hair with his fingers, trying to straighten his mussed clothes, and get out of the

studio all at once. "I want to see Julie!"

"No, Kirk; not now."

His eyes filled with apprehension. "She isn't all right! She—"

"No, she's fine! It's just that Jeff doesn't want anyone to see her yet. If everybody starts running up there—"

"Who's everybody, Haila?"

Harry asked. "It would just be Kirk and me."

"Yes, Kirk and you and Kenyon. Just to mention a few."

"What about Kenyon?" Kirk growled.

"We came up here together on a bus. He wants to see Julie, too, and track down the real murderer."

"Fat chance of Kenyon caring that Mac's in jail!" Kirk muttered. "I can't see Kenyon doing anything for anybody but Kenyon. Why does he want this case solved, anyway?"

"I think he was terribly fond of Erika."

"Terribly fond of Erika," Harry repeated thoughtfully. "You know, we all believed Kenyon when he admitted that he had swindled Mrs. Fleming, that he had taken her money under the pretense of being Erika's lover. It's an old trick. A man confesses to a lesser crime in order to convince the police that he is innocent of a more serious one. Kenyon's candor was disarming. We all believed his statement that he wasn't Erika's lover."

"No, Harry," I said. "Kenyon wasn't the man she meant to marry, I know that. For some reason I still believe him. He says if Erika had lived she would have been amused at the trick he played on her aunt. He tried to get her to tell her last night, but she wouldn't talk to him. Kirk had called, she said, and she'd promised not to see anyone until she had talked to Jeff and me."

The look that sprang into Harry's eyes made me break off. "Haila!" His usual calmness had fled, leaving him breathless. "You were there when Kirk phoned."

"Yes."

"So, in order to know about Kirk's call," Harry almost shouted, "Kenyon would have had to talk to Erika *after* Kirk phoned. And it was *after* Kirk phoned, just a few seconds or a minute, that Erika was killed!"

"But Harry—"

"Yes, I know. Kenyon might have talked to her over the phone, too. But, Haila, did you hear it ring? Did you, Haila?"

"No," I said. "The phone didn't ring."

"So Kenyon didn't call her, and yet he knew about Kirk's call," Harry said quietly. "He knew, because he was in Erika's room. He was there when she was killed."

"You mean that Kenyon—?" Kirk exclaimed incredulously. "No, Harry. Not Kenyon; he—"

"I'm going downstairs to see

him." Harry's voice was threateningly calm. "You two wait for me. Try to locate Jeff."

He moved swiftly across the studio and the doors swung behind him. Kirk stared after him, shaking his head in disbelief. "No, Haila, it wasn't Kenyon. Not that little, ineffectual—"

"Kirk, he's right!" The whole thing rose before me in one panoramic flash.

I knew that Lee Kenyon was Erika's murderer. And the murderer of Isabelle Fleming. I knew how and why he had committed both those horrible crimes.

"Kirk!" My mouth felt frozen; I couldn't seem to form the words I had to say so quickly. "Kenyon's looking for Julie now! He said so. Maybe he thinks she has a clue. He's got to get to her and keep her quiet!"

"But he doesn't know where she is! How could he?"

"He might. He *might* know! It was in front of her apartment that I met him. If he followed Jeff and me there—"

"But, Haila, he's downstairs in the bar now. You saw him."

"Yes! That's his alibi, Kirk! Don't you see? He was using me for his alibi!"

Kirk was already on his way out. I chased after him.

He turned and caught me by both arms. "No, Haila. I'm going alone. It might be dangerous."

I wrenched myself free and fol-

lowed him to the elevator. The boy obeyed Kirk's command, and we plummeted to the street floor without a stop. I raced across the lobby after Kirk. He ran into the Graylock Bar. In a moment he was back again.

"Kenyon's left," he told me. "And Harry's not there. He's probably looking for him. I've got to find Jeff. Where is he, Haila?"

"He might have gone to see Wyatt."

"I'll call headquarters. Get a cab ready," Kirk said.

I hailed a taxi and climbed in. It seemed days before Kirk returned. I had prepared the driver and he had the motor roaring.

Kirk stood with one foot on the running board. "Haila, get out of there. You mustn't come."

I reached out for his arm and pulled him into the cab beside me. I nodded to the driver and we swung out into the traffic.

"Did you call Wyatt?"

"He hasn't been in all day."

"And Jeff? Was he there?"

"No. He hasn't been there, either." Kirk put his head into his hands. "God! If only I could find Jeff!"

IX

WE DIDN'T wait for the elevator. Kirk left me far behind as he rushed up the stairs. He was frantically beating at Julie's door when I got to it.

"Wait, Kirk!" I pushed him aside and twisted the knob. "Julie!" I shouted, "Julie!"

We heard the sound of a bolt sliding smoothly and of a key turning in its lock. And then Julie Taylor stood in the doorway. She was wearing a gay little apron. In one hand she held a can of coffee, and tucked in the curve of her arm was a percolator.

Kirk grasped her hand and held it tightly in both of his. He said at last, "Hullo, Julie! Have a good time?"

Julie smiled at him. "Kirk! Kirk, darling. I didn't know it was you knocking. Until I heard Haila I thought—you see, Jeff made me promise not to open the door to anyone."

She seemed to notice our strained faces for the first time. "Come on out in the kitchen," she said. "You both look as if you could stand some coffee."

We followed her down the hall to her kitchen. Kirk and I sat down while Julie measured coffee and water and plugged the percolator into the wall socket.

I looked around the cheerful room, at Julie's placid face and at Kirk's, which seemed to be bursting with relief. Our chase began to seem silly here in Julie's kitchen. Even our fears for her became remote.

Kirk was telling her now about Lee Kenyon. "He hasn't tried to see you, Julie, has he?"

She shook her head. "No. Nobody's called but Jeff."

"Jeff!" I exclaimed. "When?"

"About ten minutes ago. From police headquarters. He told me that I was to stay here, and he and Wyatt would be down later."

Kirk said quietly, "I called headquarters ten minutes ago. Jeff wasn't there. Wyatt hadn't been there all day."

He leaned forward, and his eyes held Julie's. "Julie, are you sure it was Jeff?"

There was perplexity in her gesture as she brushed her hand across her forehead. "I think so. I didn't answer it until it rang twelve times, as Jeff said."

"Someone else might have let it ring that long, if he knew that you were here to answer it."

"You mean that it might have been Kenyon?"

"Did he say anything to make you sure it was Jeff?"

Julie closed her eyes. "No, she said at last. 'He said just what I told you. And if Jeff wasn't at headquarters—'"

Kirk was on his feet. He gave his orders crisply: "Haila, you get out of here. Now; right away. Try to find Jeff."

I was already slipping my arms into my coat and reaching for my purse.

"And, Julie!" Kirk said. "You get into some street clothes and go up to the studio. Lock yourself in. Stay there till I call you."

She was standing by the refrigerator, pouring cream into a pitcher. Her voice was very calm: "I'm not going, Kirk. I'm staying here with you."

"Julie!" Kirk said. "Julie, it may be dangerous."

She came into the dinette and laid her hand on his arm. "Yes. That's why I'm staying. He should be here soon."

I took off my coat. "I, also, am sticking around."

Kirk looked from me to Julie with desperation. Then he shrugged helplessly. "All right; you win. You both win."

Julie disconnected the percolator and poured three cups of coffee. She placed a sugar bowl and creamer on the table, then sat down opposite Kirk.

"The spoons are in the drawer by you, Kirk," she said.

The room seemed to grow suddenly cold and cheerless. I shivered, and looked at my coffee. It didn't smell so delicious any more.

In a tone I hoped was matter-of-fact, I asked, "May I have a spoon, please, Kirk?"

Kirk's hand reached out toward mine. I half turned to face him.

It wasn't a spoon that Kirk Findlay extended. It was a small, shiny automatic. I lifted my eyes. The face above the pistol was one I'd never seen before. The eyes were slits of icy green. The mouth was an ugly gash across his face.

Kirk rose and backed against

the wall. His voice was harsh:

"I gave you your chance, Haila. I gave you two chances. Now, you'll stay with Julie." His eyes shifted across the table, but the gun remained pointed at a spot between Julie and me. "Julie, I want some towels. All you have."

Julie didn't move. She stared at Kirk in a sort of dazed horror. A faint smile wavered on her lips, broke, and was gone.

"You're fooling, Kirk? You wouldn't—"

"Get me the towels."

She crossed the kitchen slowly, like a sleepwalker. She brought back a neat pile of towels and held them out to Kirk. They slid from her hands to the floor.

"Pick them up, Julie. Tie Haila's hands behind her."

"Kirk, I can't! I can't!" She held her hands up to show him. They were trembling violently.

"Do it, Julie."

Almost hypnotized, I put my hands behind me, and I knew that Julie's shaking ones were tying them together. I felt the strong linen tightening as it was wound around them.

"Now her feet to the chair legs, Julie."

Julie was crying. Tears ran down her cheeks, her shoulders shook with great, convulsive heaves. But nothing but a breathy, gasping sound came out. She stood up at last and looked at me. There was nothing in her eyes, not even

recognition, as they swept over the knots that she had made.

Kirk's hand was on her shoulder; he pushed her into a chair. He placed his gun in his pocket, and she offered no resistance to him as he bound her legs and arms. With a quick, hard movement he gagged her with another towel. Walking over to me, he checked my knots and then stood looking at us, smiling a little.

I found my voice. Even to me it sounded choky and unfamiliar:

"Kirk, you can't! Jeff's coming—he'll know! You called headquarters, Kirk. You told them to come!"

"No, Haila. Not Jeff. I didn't call the police. I called Lee Kenyon. It's Kenyon who's coming here."

"But you couldn't have! He wasn't—"

"Yes. He was. He was in the Graylock Bar. I telephoned him there and had him paged."

"But Harry was with him," I said. "Harry will know."

"Kenyon will break away from him and come here. Don't worry, Haila." He was smiling again. "I won't get in any trouble. The police will think just what you thought, especially when they meet Kenyon coming out of this building. And when Harry tells them how Kenyon sneaked away from him in the bar."

Panic hit me then, blind, raging panic. "Kirk!" I said desperately. "You can't! I won't let you! I don't

care what you do, I'll scream, Kirk! I'll—"

"Go ahead. Scream."

I opened my mouth. Kirk was advancing toward me. His face came close to mine; it grew larger as it neared me, as though my eyes were camera lenses panning down upon him in a close-up shot. My scream wouldn't come.

I hardly felt the coarse, dry cloth he shoved into my mouth until, having drained up all the saliva, it began to choke me. I gagged and felt suddenly nauseated.

Kirk snapped off the light, but there was faint illumination from an apartment across the court.

Now, I told myself, *now*. I forced myself to close my eyes, to stop watching and thinking and feeling. Now it was going to happen.

I could hear Kirk moving about. I felt the rustle of him as he came close. And then I felt him pass, and heard the kitchen door close. Without realizing its significance, I knew that he had gone out of the apartment.

I heard a key turn in the lock, the sound of something being placed against the other side of the door. Not something hard, not a chair nor a table; something soft and brushing.

His footsteps moved with un-hurried caution down the hall; the door at the end of it, the outside door, opened and then closed. I

heard the clicking sound it made as it locked itself behind him.

Cold sweat broke through my pores; I felt it icy on my forehead. Shudders racked me. But they were shudders of overwhelming relief. Julie and I were not to share the fates of Erika and Isabelle Fleming.

For Kirk Findlay had no key to this apartment; if he had he would have used it when he first arrived. He could not get back in. We had been bound merely to give him time for escape. He had locked the kitchen door as an added precaution.

Then I suddenly saw something. The four small handles of white enamel on Julie's stove were visible, and they pointed straight out into the room.

Even as I looked I began to smell it. A sickening sweet odor tingling in my nostrils. What was it like to die by gas? It must be painless; it must be quiet and untortured. Old men in cheap rooming houses were forever letting their coffee boil over while they slept. They died without even waking. It wouldn't hurt.

If you didn't struggle against it, it wouldn't hurt. . . . Don't fight, Haila. Fill your lungs with it, fill them quickly. Pretty soon you'll be sleepy, your head will nod.

But I wasn't getting sleepy. Each breath I took burned in my nose, my throat. My eyes were smarting. I didn't want to die.

There was the window, tantalizingly close. One square of thin glass holding out the clean, fresh air. If I could break it! I strained at the bindings on my legs. Slipping my foot partly out of my pump, I pulled my foot back. I swung it. The shoe flew off, described a pitiful little arc, and fell to the floor.

Frantically, I kicked the other one. It went nowhere near the window. I turned to Julie. If she could manage to get a little looser than I, if she could kick a little bit farther.

Her head was sunk down on her chest. I moved in my chair until it teetered and made a jarring noise. Her head jerked up. A strange, strangled sound broke toward me, and the light caught her full on the face.

I knew then what that sound had been. It had been a laugh. Julie's eyes were wide and staring. Her whole body shook with horrible, soundless laughter. And then I knew that Julie Taylor was mad.

It may have been that knowledge which made me tear at my bonds with new, hard fury. I pulled until the blood pounded in my head. I could feel the cloth, drawn to sharpness now, bite into my ankles and wrists. The knots seemed a little looser.

But there was so little time. The gas was burning agonizingly in my throat; I coughed through my gags. I could still see Julie's fran-

tic eyes mocking me, still hear that burst of insane laughter in my ears.

I tugged again, and the cloth suddenly split, and my legs were free. I struggled to get up, my hands still tied behind me. For a fraction of a second I stood there, dizzy and bewildered. The room spun around me; I couldn't find the window.

I heard the sound of ripping cloth and the jerky movement from Julie's chair, and still I stood there. It wasn't until she loomed up beside me that I realized that she, too, was free.

I ran to the window. With my hands tied behind me, I couldn't open it; I couldn't even use them to break it.

I turned sidewise to lunge my shoulder through the pane of glass.

And as I turned I saw Julie's face in back of me. She lunged at me, shoving me away from the window.

I staggered, fighting to regain my balance. And then I saw the sharp, white corner of her refrigerator coming up to meet me as I fell.

X

I OPENED MY eyes, to see Jeff smiling at me from the foot of Julie's bed. Everything, then, was all right. A wonderful feeling of peace and security paraded down me clear to my toes.

"How are you feeling, darling?" Jeff asked.

"Fine, except for my throat," I rasped. "It's burning. That gas!" The sickly sweet odor of it still clung to the place. "I'm full of it, Jeff!"

"Don't worry; I've got you moored."

"Julie! Is she—?" I couldn't ask it. "Where is she, Jeff?"

"Relax—I'll tell you. She's downtown meeting Mac when the gates clang shut behind him, a free man. And, by now, Kirk has Mac's old cell. Don't think about it."

I closed my eyes and relaxed. Now I could take up my life again where the murder of Isabelle Fleming had so rudely interrupted it. I would start cooking for Jeff; in fact, I would learn to cook.

"Jeff, how did Julie recover so quickly?"

He shrugged. "Maybe she doesn't breathe as deeply as you do."

"It was horrible, Jeff. Kirk; my pal, Kirk! To think he'd want to kill me!"

"He tried to get rid of you, Haila, didn't he? But, no, you had to tag along where you weren't wanted."

"And how did you ever get here on time?"

"An elevator boy at the Graylock told Wyatt and me that you and Kirk had left together. We knew that Kirk would head for Julie as soon as he discovered where she was."

"Why?" I asked Jeff.

"Because she had the facts to deduce that he was the murderer. She found that chloroform can in Mac's raincoat pocket. And Mac hadn't worn his raincoat to the studio that afternoon. It wasn't there until that night. So none of the models could have put it in his pocket then. And Julie found it before any of them, or Harry, came back that evening."

"So Julie knew it had to be either Kirk or Mac. And she picked Mac, and ran away to avoid incriminating him. But as soon as she realized that Mac wouldn't put an empty chloroform can in his own pocket if he had been the killer, she would have known that Kirk was the guilty one. And he had to get to Julie before she did realize that."

"Is that how you figured it out, Jeff?"

"That, plus this. Kirk made it look as if he were protecting Mac. Even lying and hiding evidence for him. Those negatives that spoiled Harry's alibi for Mac, remember? Well, if Kirk was such a pal, why did he hide them in the most obvious place in the studio?"

"I know, Jeff!"

"Now you know. He wanted them to be found, so Mac's alibi would be ruined. He went through the motions of hiding them because, when they were found, Wyatt would think Mac had done the hiding to save himself. And Kirk

also knew that if it should be discovered that he, Kirk, had hidden them it would look as if he were protecting Mac."

"And, Jeff, Kirk hesitated when Wyatt asked him about Mrs. Fleming's loan! He made it seem as if he were lying for Mac!"

"Sure. And those things made me wonder if Kirk wasn't planting this murder on Mac because he was guilty himself. But his motive bothered me. This murder was committed for money and—"

"And Kirk didn't give a damn about money! It was one of his chief charms."

Jeff nodded. "That's the way he played it. But look back. Occasionally he got bitter about his lot. He hated cheap liquor; he liked expensive Scotch. He hated subways; taxis were his meat. It was he who got Mac to take that elaborate studio; it was Kirk's taste and Mac's generosity that broke Photo Arts."

"I'd like to see their expense account. Not that Kirk's a miser or a financier. Luxury-loving, that's Kirk. Lighting cigars with thousand-dollar bills."

"Well, when he met Erika he thought he'd found those big bills—the Fleming millions. But Erika married Mac. And that's when he began to hate Mac."

"Then it was Kirk she was going to divorce Mac for."

"Right. But on Saturday Mrs. Fleming threatened to disinherit

her if she got a divorce. And Kirk had to kill Mrs. Fleming before she could change her will. He didn't want Erika without that money."

"It had already been arranged that Mrs. Fleming was to pose at Photo Arts on Monday. That was Kirk's chance. He was waiting for her in the darkroom. He'd asked her to meet him in the room at the end of the corridor, that he had something important to tell her concerning her niece. She didn't know that room was the darkroom. She'd never been to the studio before. He expected her to walk right in."

"But it was Julie who walked in. He managed to get away without being recognized, and then headed Mrs. Fleming off by saying that he would see her the next day."

"Kirk had missed, but he wasn't discouraged. He smashed the plates in order to get the picture retaken that night. And this time he wouldn't use chloroform; he'd use the Cottrell knife. He sneaked it off the table after the test shot, hid it, and waited patiently for a safe time to use it. That time came after the final picture, when the models were in their dressing-rooms and the rest of you in the studio. Kirk, ostensibly, was in the darkroom developing pictures."

"But, Jeff, he must have realized that Julie knew something. After that darkroom business and her disappearance."

"He knew that Julie had found

the chloroform can. Anyone else would have talked about it. He figured she was keeping quiet because she thought it had been Mac in the darkroom, and when she ran away he was sure of it. That was a break for him—Julie thinking that Mac was guilty.”

“Surely Erika must have suspected Kirk, Jeff.”

“She did, finally. And you know what happened to her. She probably refused to keep their relationship a secret any longer. And Kirk’s safety depended on that secret being kept. That’s why he had to pull out the lights at the Barrel Room and sock me. He couldn’t even afford to be seen with her.” Jeff looked at me solicitously. “How do you feel now, Haila?”

“Not so good, but I’d like to sit up.”

“I wouldn’t darling. You must take it easy.” He pulled the covers up around my neck and kissed me.

“Jeff, Kirk was in the room with Erika when I arrived at her apartment, was he not?”

He nodded. “When he told us at the Marcy Towers that Erika hadn’t answered the phone, that she wasn’t home, he was lying. He had talked to her, told her that he was coming up there before you and I came. He left us and rushed to her.

“And then he turned your arrival into a break for him. Erika, perhaps at the point of a gun, pre-

tended she was talking to him on the phone. That was his alibi. But he couldn’t use the gun because you would have heard it. He strangled her.”

“That phone business, Jeff. Harry figured out something like that for Lee Kenyon.”

“No, Kenyon didn’t visit Erika; he really phoned her. And it was right after Kirk’s call. The one from the hotel, not the fake one, which was the only one Harry knew about.”

I thought about what an amusing and charming young man I had always considered Kirk. It just went to show. And I thought about Mac and Julie and the tragedy it had taken to bring them together. And I wondered if they would get over it and make a life for themselves. It might take years.

“Mac’s lucky to have Julie,” Jeff was saying.

“Jeff! How did you know I was thinking about them?”

“Mental telepathy.”

I scoffed, and Jeff smiled. “You don’t believe in that sort of thing, do you, Haila? Mind over matter?”

“Mind over tommyrot!”

“All right. There was a man once in Milwaukee—”

“Those mind-over-matter cases always happen to someone in Milwaukee, someone you can’t possibly check on.”

“I’ll tell you one you can check on. Somebody you know.”

"I dare you to," I said.

"All right. Julie has an electric icebox, you know."

"Yes."

"And a brand-new electric toaster. And a brand-new electric percolator for coffee, and a—"

"Jeff, what are you—?"

"She never cooks, except toast and coffee, so she never uses her stove. It isn't connected."

"What!"

"Julie closed her account with the gas company, just last week.

You were asphyxiated via mind over matter."

"Why didn't she tell me!"

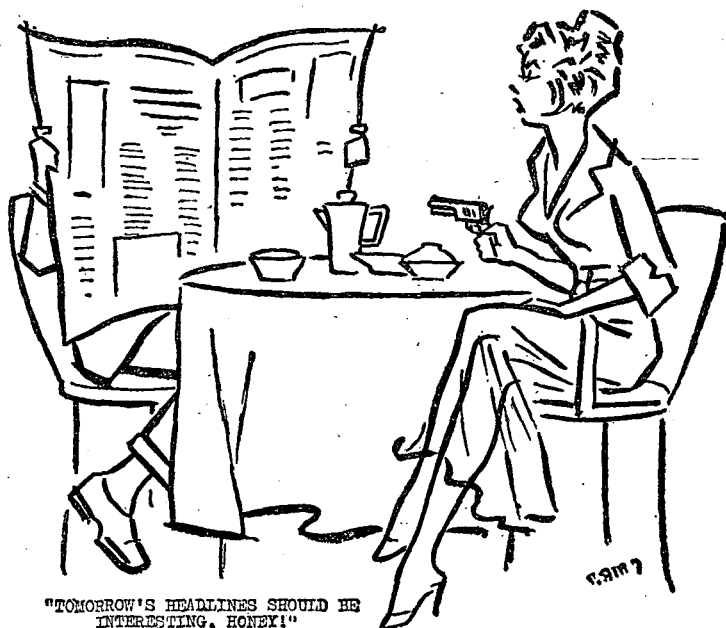
"She was gagged. And she did keep you from hurting yourself when you were going to crash through the window."

"But, Jeff, I can still smell the gas!"

"You're cute, Haila."

"It wasn't mind over matter!"

"Your mind! And what does it matter? You're awful cute, Haila. Kiss me."



"TOMORROW'S HEADLINES SHOULD BE INTERESTING, HONEY!"

An Hilarious Gambling Story By

JOHN D. DUCKWORTH

All Joe Rivers wanted was his money back. Not that he was a poor loser — but \$20,000 was too much to be cheated out of for an evening of poker. So he sets out in quest of retribution. And Colonel Billy is left holding the bag of an awful lot of . . .

Tainted Money

IT WAS THE finest gambling casino, bar none, in the West. "Colonel" Billy Chance rolled the smooth smoke of his expensive cherott around his well-fed cheeks and expelled it in rings of self-satisfaction.

He said to the mayor, "I figure we've got it made. The rough-house, doped drinks, strong-arm days paid off. But not like this." He waved an expressive hand around his redwood panelled office. Beyond the walls lay the ornate games rooms, with their crystal and mahogany fixtures. French glass mirrors, carpets, and good

copies of outstanding art masterpieces for decoration.

The free lunch included dishes never heard of in the West. The chef had been shanghaied from the famed New York Waldorf. Seattle's elite dropped in almost daily for a drink and a game, as much to be seen as to gamble.

The mayor grinned and his jowls shook with sardonic humor. "When they'll pay extra to be fleeced, and come back for more, you've really conned 'em, Billy! The squarest games in the whole world, as that writer from Harper's Weekly put it! Heh!"



"He should have known how hot the deck was that made him a winner!" Colonel Billy chuckled. "But it was worth it. Every visiting dude since that article has stopped in and dropped from a hundred to several thousand."

"Now don't go boasting too far," the mayor said. "A couple have won sizeable stakes."

"Publicity is gold," Colonel Billy said. "The right people will always win here. Which reminds me, why don't you sit in for a few

relaxing games of banco?" It was a nice method for political pay-off and keeping the mayor quiet about Colonel Billy's crooked past.

The mayor carried his portly figure out to the hundred foot mahogany bar like a prima donna taking a seventh curtain. The opulence and dignity of the establishment made a proper frame for him. He ordered in a loud imperious voice—Quantro and black caviar, which he'd never heard of until Colonel Billy brought super-culture to Seattle.

A little sawed off character regarded the caviar critically and grunted, "Fish eggs! Don't you want something better than that?"

The mayor nearly choked. He said, "Sir, these are a delicacy imported from Russia!"

"Hell," the character said. "Come on up to Alaska and we'll feed 'em to you by the scoop if you like 'em. But I'll tell you something, if you like glue, salmon eggs are better."

The mayor turned to look the character over more thoroughly. He was apparently constituted of pure weathered rawhide, done up in a store suit which fitted him like a sack. The mayor now remembered seeing him earlier that day at Fontaine and Laroux, the fur merchants, but he had been in boots and mackinaw.

"You're Joe Rivers," the mayor ended the embarrassing matter

of the fish eggs diplomatically. "I take it that you made a good deal with Fontaine?"

Joe Rivers' winked a bright blue eye. "Four times what I've have gotten from those fur traders up in Alaska," he chuckled. "I almost felt sorry for Fontaine."

"Don't!" the mayor almost said, for he knew that no matter what Fontaine had paid for Joe Rivers' pelts, it would not be half their value. Instead, he said with courteous interest, "It was a real bundle, I take?"

"Eighteen thousand seven hundred!" The trapper nodded with satisfaction. "Like I say, I really felt sorry for him. There must be some skinflint in me I didn't know about."

The mayor looked across Joe Rivers at a houseman who was eavesdropping. "Eighteen thousand seven hundred!" he repeated. "That is quite a sum. I hope that you aren't carrying all of it in cash?"

"I expect it will be a great deal more before I leave," Joe Rivers allowed complacently. "After four years in the bush, I figure I've got luck with me. I intend to back Colonel Billy to a standstill."

He nodded at his own dreams, rapped his six ounce glass and remarked to the bartender, "These are awful small drinks you dudes serve."

Billy Chance appeared miraculously on the houseman's signal.

He boomed jovially, "For an Alaskan sourdough, I agree! Sir, allow me to present you with a real gold stein, which happens to hold exactly one quart, a fit size for an Alaskan."

The bartender climbed on a stool and brought down one of the house's cherished decorative steins. It was an excellent piece of black and gold lusterware, and beside that, it was moulded in the shape of a skunk, the tail forming the handle. Joe Rivers accepted it as if it were a newborn baby. His eyes boggled.

"Why Colonel Billy," he said, voice thick with emotion, "this is something like I never seen before. I've got a whole cabin full of real pet skunks, too. They'll think I done honored 'em with a statue."

Colonel Billy chuckled. "So Fontaine told me. You keep 'em like cats. That is the reason for that particular gift, and I assure you, nobody else could have bought it from me at any price. Nobody!"

"I declare!" Joe Rivers rubbed a horny knuckle at the corner of his eye. "Yessir, I declare, I never expected nothing like the good treatment I've had since I hit Seattle! Makes me almost feel bad about bucking you tonight, Colonel Billy."

"Well, we have to take our chances," Billy Chance said. "But it is a point of honor with this house that we don't want patrons

bucking their own luck when its bad."

"Oh, you don't have to worry none about me!" Joe Rivers said. "I just might not play tonight because you've been such a handsome friend I would hate to hurt you."

Colonel Billy made a suave gesture. "I have the greatest premonition that if you do play tonight, you will lose, and I'd rather not see it."

"I couldn't lose tonight if you stacked the decks!" Joe Rivers insisted. "Colonel, I'm riding high!"

As a matter of fact, he was quite high and might just content himself with that, so Colonel Billy gave him the final needed nudge.

"When I like a man, I consider him a friend," the colonel said. "Now there is a good way to test your luck and that is to try it with one single silver dollar. Now I feel so sure that you are not in luck tonight, that I will wager ten dollars on the side that you lose."

Joe Rivers fished in a brocade vest pocket and slapped down a gold piece the size of a quarter. "Make it twenty, colonel. I've got no small change."

"Then permit me to offer the dollar," the colonel said. He turned and nodded at the one armed bandits along the wall. Three of the slot machines were super ornate—one for trappers, one for miners, one for fishermen.

"Let's try your luck in the trapper's," Chance suggested.

"But I want your word, Joe Rivers, that if you lose, you must promise to restrain yourself from playing tonight. Be our guest otherwise. Steaks, wines, sherberts, perhaps one of these comely blondes or a girl with raven tresses. But no gambling tonight if your luck is off, which I believe."

"You've got a deal, friend," the trapper said with heartfelt emotion.

He picked up the colonel's silver dollar to test his luck. The dollar did seem a bit heavy, and he noticed that it had been slightly notched along the edges, but he dropped it in and pulled the lever.

The dials slammed home. And of all the animals pictured on those dials, what came up was skunk, skunk, skunk—a valuable fur in 1910. There was a grinding whir and then a cascade of sound as eighty silver dollars spilled over onto the floor.

Colonel Billy Chance helped his guest retrieve his scattered money. "Well, there is no disputing hard cash," he acknowledged. "I must admit that you're riding luck. I hope for my sake it does not continue quite as good."

He gave a wry laugh and clapped Joe Rivers on his solid shoulder and departed.

Joe Rivers filled his hat with the silver dollars and placed it on the bar. By gawdamighty, it was the third sign of his luck! First, he'd been paid off a six hundred

dollar grubstake he never expected in Juneau before he left. Then he'd skinned poor Fontaine out of four times the value of his furs. Here, he'd already eaten a small fortune of freelunch steaks with free liquor, and they'd not even wanted him to play.

Billy Chance could probably smell out a man riding luck. But Joe had bucked him, and already was a hundred dollars winner. Tonight, he couldn't lose, he figured.

He said to the bartender, "I think I'll try a little draw." And started toward the game rooms.

"One minute sir. That gold skunk's not complete without a little spray." The barkeep grinned. He picked out a new bottle of Joe's drink and upended it into the stein.

Joe Rivers found a lively game. His luck was good from the start and he enjoyed outsmarting the cheechakos, although they probably would not have recognized the Alaskan name for greenhorns. He got away with some flagrant four flushes. It was clear to him that these Seattle boys scared easy and just didn't know the game.

The stein was just about empty when he picked up a hand of three kings, a deuce and an ace. He discarded the deuce after heavy raises. The dealer discarded two cards. He could not be holding three aces obviously, and when Joe drew a second ace, he was out

for blood. He had 'em squeezed where it hurt.

"A thousand," he said, and raised. The houseman raised right back.

"He's crazy," Joe Rivers thought and raised right again. They batted the raises back and forth until Joe had to call the pot because every dollar he had was already in.

The houseman showed four deuces. *One of them, or its facsimile, had been Joe River's discard.*

Joe was trying to clear his mind to frame his protest when a rasping voice behind him said, "That was real bad luck partner, wasn't it?"

Joe Rivers turned to look at the speaker and saw the broadest shoulders he'd ever seen. Even among the miners of Fairbanks, this boy would have looked big. Beside that, he had the limber look of a wrestler trained at rough and tumble. And he was dressed like a bouncer.

Joe made no answer and turned back to the table. The cards had been shelled up and were in new pack. The dealer was scooping the pot in.

Joe sucked a long breath and expelled it. "Well," he growled, "Colonel Billy and me have two things in common. My money, and we're both skunk skimmers."

The houseman grinned. "Better luck next time."

"Oh I'll be back and you'll damned well remember me next year!" Joe River growled. "You'll wish to God you'd never seen me!"

The houseman still grinned. "Stop at the bar and fill that gold skunk on the way out, friend," he advised. "You're going to want a legitimate hangover."

They figured he'd need it, and for all he said he'd be back next spring to make things even. And get skunked again, of course.

They were right. He was back like clockwork in the spring. This time, he didn't even stop for a store suit before hitting Colonel Billy's 4-Square House of Chance. The houseman figured he must have been starving for four months from the way he gorged. Somewhere along the way, he'd learned to order the really expensive champagnes.

Still wearing his bush clothes, Joe Rivers had an ungodly stink of skunk about him. The elite town customers waved perfumed handkerchiefs under their snouts. He'd have been tossed out bodily if the house hadn't already had word that this year, he'd gotten twenty-three thousand for his furs from Fontaine and Laroux.

After eating expansively, Joe Rivers did not seem too anxious to play. Instead, he requested an immediate audience with Colonel Billy. The little trapper was ushered into the Chance private office, and seated himself in a leath-

er chair by the desk at the colonel's courteous invitation.

"It's this way, Colonel Billy," Joe said. "I know you're a busy gent and a man of few words. So I'll come to the point. You know who I am—Joe Rivers. A little over one year ago, in this here place, I was cheated out of about twenty-thousand dollars. I've had all year to get real mad over it. I am asking that you return the money to me!"

No change of expression crossed the gambler's face. "Mr. Rivers, I have a reputation worth far more to me as an asset than crookedness could ever earn for me. Many men who've lost heavily have made false charges and were I to settle even one such demand, it would be equivalent to an admission that unfair play is possible in my house!"

"I guess likely that's so, Colonel Billy," Joe Rivers said.

Chance nodded. "I appreciate your attitude, Mr. Rivers. It is the easiest thing in the world to be mistaken about being cheated in a poker game. Why, I often forget what my own discard is, and I'm supposed to be a pretty good professional!"

The trapper sighed, and shook his head. "I played poker when you must've been rolling hoops, Colonel Billy. And if it ever gets so I can't tell what I discarded and draw to every hand in a game, I'll quit and take up mumblety-peg. I

just didn't want to start nothing unless I *had* to."

"Start what?" asked Colonel Billy, with deadly softness.

"I'm not tipping my hand." Joe Rivers got up to his feet. "But I might prove to be the most expensive little man that ever riffled a deck in your house. Good day, Colonel Billy!"

There was an angry glitter in the colonel's eyes, and a convulsive movement of his hands, as Joe Rivers opened the door and walked out. A minute later Colonel Billy Chance was whispering to the lookout to give Joe Rivers the works—but good.

Even after they'd conned him into a game, Joe Rivers was turning out to be a real problem. They had to let him win to soften him for the real kill and he had three or four thousand winnings. But it was in his pocket. He played his last table stakes against the pot and looked around at the hard and steely eyes that surrounded him.

"Well, boys," he said. "I may not win this pot, but you're sure going to remember that I raised it high!"

He dug both hands into his mackinaw pockets. The dealer gave an imperceptible wink at a houseman. That was the old line of talk—they had him going when he was reaching for buried money.

The trapper stood up because his hands were obviously caught by the bundle his hand grabbed.

He worried them out of his pocket and threw the contents on the table.

"There's the raise, boys," he grinned. He lifted a sudden tingling Aleut yell and turning, dove frantically for the front doors.

What landed in the pot was four little skunks he'd raised and trained. The lights were bright, and the yell scared them. They sensed startling enmity in the suddenly barking and scrambling strangers. They lifted their tails with remarkable rapidity and let fly.

That was not the end of Joe Rivers, but it was the end of Colonel Billy Chance. The whole main room of his establishment was ruined. The mayor picked up scent on his clothes but didn't know it and told his wife he'd been out at a Baptist prayer meeting.

Major Rogers, who sat in the game, grabbed a handfull of the tainted money. His own nose was so full of skunk mist that he couldn't tell. But his new bride could, and the next day's newspaper divulged the detail that the same odor had permeated clean to the suites of Texas Dolly and Ruby Belle above the House of Chance. Every man who'd been in the room could be identified on proximity for days. They lost no love on Colonel Billy.

Joe Rivers tumbled aboard the *Alaska Queen* just as it was casting off. A sailor looked at the mob converging upon the dock behind and inquired, "You raise some stink back there, Joe Rivers?"

"A mite," Joe Rivers admitted with a grin. "Nothing crooked, you understand. But you might say I gave Colonel Billy some slightly tainted money."

Complete ... IN THE NEXT ISSUE

MURDER MOST UNWELCOME
by **BRETT HALLIDAY**

●
THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET
●

She was fragile, dainty and tiny in a way of women raised in an era of lavender and old lace. But now she was a forlorn doll of a woman who had been battered cruelly into oblivion. Shayne vowed—regardless of time and effort he would bring her killer to justice.

THE BLUE HAND

He only works in person with important people like shipowners, labor bosses, the Mayor and hoodlums. That's O'Hara!

A "SLOT-MACHINE" KELLY NOVELET

by DENNIS LYNDS

IT WAS AN ordinary night. Slot-Machine Kelly was beating Joe Harris out of the price of his booze with the best trained dice this side of Hong Kong. Slot watched Joe's boss turn purple as Joe lost and poured the booze. A regular night. Until the three big guys walked in.

Slot-Machine was Joe's best friend, room mate, and private charity. It wasn't that Slot was such a free-loader, which he was, but he just didn't like work, and, anyway, a private eye doesn't get rich around the waterfront. "Stop howlin'," Slot always said to Joe, "you got a trade."

Joe once said he learned bartending to support his old lady, only now he supported Slot-Machine, so he might as well let Slot roll for the booze since that made Slot-Machine feel better.

"That way I earns my gargle," Slot explained.

"If you lose, no booze, right?" Joe said.

"Don't get carried away, Joe boy," Slot said.

Slot was five drinks ahead when the big guys showed up. Joe's boss was way past purple and turning black as he watched Joe giving his booze away, when the three guys walked in.

© 1963, by Dennis Lynds



They were big men. All three of them could have walked out on a basketball court and fitted right in. Their shoulders were so wide they touched both sides of the doorway coming in. Their hair was grey but

all there, and they had fat on them, but not so much Slot would have wanted to tangle with them in a fair fight. Not that Slot for a moment ever thought of fighting fair.

Joe got a grip on his billy club when Slot nodded his head toward them. They looked like triple trouble.

They didn't exactly come in together. One came in first and leaned on the end of the bar nearest the door. The second one came in about two minutes later. He leaned on the bar near the back. Five minutes after the second, the third one came in. This one stood next to Slot-Machine.

They all ordered bourbon. They were all dressed exactly alike. They looked like triplets.

The one next to Slot-Machine looked down at Joe and said, "You Harris?"

"That's what my income tax says," Joe said. "My mother wasn't so sure."

"I heard you was funny," the big man said. "I want to talk to Kelly."

"Kelly who?" Joe said.

"I want to buy him a free drink," the man said.

Slot-Machine grinned. "This is your lucky day, I'm Kelly, and I'll have a double Irish."

The big man looked at Slot. "One arm'n all, I guess you are Kelly. Okay, peeper, I got a job for you."

Now Slot-Machine liked whisky. He liked free whisky almost better than breathing. But he didn't like people to talk about his missing arm. He could talk about it, and Joe could call him

Slot-Machine the one-armed bandit, but he liked strangers to call him Mr. Kelly, or "Hey you," or something like that.

So Slot looked up at the big guy, he never claimed to be a big man himself, and said, "I got only one to break, you got two, which one you want busted first?"

"Why you punk!"

The other two big guys moved so fast around Slot that it looked like Slot-Machine was standing on Wall Street with those tall buildings all around him. Slot's hand went inside his coat to where he carries his Luger. He even had a permit. Captain Gazzo had signed the permit one day when the Captain was drunk.

"It's dark down here," Slot-Machine said; "stand back a way, okay boys?"

The second big man held the first one back. The second big guy said, "Okay, Kelly, I said I got a job for you."

"What happened to the whisky?" Slot said. "And that first guy said he had a job. Is it two jobs, or are you all one guy?"

The third big guy waved to Harris. Joe took down the bottle of good whisky and poured for all of them. Bourbon for the big men, Irish for Slot. Slot drank his down as if he thought they were going to stop making it.

"You got a thirst," the third big guy said. "You got brains to go with it?"

"Who wants to use my brains?" Slot said.

"Frank O'Hara," the second big man said.

Slot-Machine was not easily impressed. Frank O'Hara impressed him. Frank O'Hara was a big man, in all ways. O'Hara was president of the biggest stevedoring company on the docks, and if the whispers were half true he ran the docks and maybe the city.

"Why does O'Hara need me?" Slot-Machine said.

The third big man said, "I want a twenty-four hour tail job, I'll pay good."

Slot-Machine looked at the third big man. "You're O'Hara?"

Because that was the strange thing about Frank O'Hara, everyone had heard of him, but very few had ever seen him. He was that important. He only worked in person with shipowners, the Mayor, labor bosses, and hoodlums. That was O'Hara's city.

"You want the job?" the second big man said.

Slot-Machine realized any one of them could be O'Hara, and they were not going to tell him which one. O'Hara was very scared of someone.

"Why me?" Slot said.

"You was recommended," the first big man said.

"My mother wouldn't recommend me," Slot said. "Try again."

They were all scared, Slot could see that as clear as a dime in the

gutter. Big and tough as they were, at least one of them, the real O'Hara, was very scared. That was, Slot guessed, why they looked like king-sized Bobbsey Twins, or triplets. Old time kings used that trick, the dressing other guys to look just like the king himself so that in battle the enemy wasn't sure which one was the real king.

"Don't worry about it," the third big man said. "I got your name, you want the job or not?"

Slot shrugged. "Who can say no if the price is right?"

"The price is right," the first big man said.

Slot shrugged and picked up his drink. His arm hit the edge of the bar, as if by accident, and the whisky sprayed all over the three big men. They all swore and jumped back. Two of them started to mop the whisky off the third. The third big man just stood there swearing while the other two mopped at him with their handkerchiefs.

Slot-Machine grinned at the third big man. "Now we know, right, Mr. O'Hara?"

The third big man, the one who was being mopped, looked at Slot-Machine kind of thoughtful. He pushed the other two away from him.

"Maybe you do have some brains, Kelly," said the third big man, who was Frank O'Hara himself. "That was a cute trick."

"I figure flunkies just can't get



out of the habit of wet-nursing the boss," Slot said. "Why do you need me, O'Hara? You've got enough strong-arm boys to handle an army?"

"I can handle hoodlums, finks, and the Government," O'Hara said, "but this is different. This is someone who won't give up, not ever. All this one wants is me dead, and that's hard to handle. This one can't be bought, fixed, scared, or conned, and by now he'll know all my regular boys on sight."

"You're scared, O'Hara," Slot said. "Why?"

"If I could tell you I wouldn't need you. I'll pay good, and I can tell you what to watch for."

"Tell me," Slot said.

"You look for four men, all sailors. One has a bad limp, left leg. One has only one eye, the left eye is missing, he wears a patch sometimes. You look for a giant, a real giant, maybe seven feet and strong as he looks. That was what they were like the last time I saw them."

"When was that?"

"Twenty-five years ago."

"Great," Slot said. "That was three guys, you said four."

"Yeh, four. But really only one, he's the brains, and he's the one wants me stiff. All I can tell you about him is he looked like me, sort of, last time I saw him. Same size and all. Twenty-five years ago he gave me this."

O'Hara opened his coat and shirt and showed a bullet scar on his right shoulder. The scar was directly under a tattoo of a four-inch blue hand. The bullet had not missed paydirt by much. "I even changed my name since those days, but he's found me."

"That's some tattoo," Slot said. "You and your friends was maybe shipmates?"

"That's all you get, Kelly," O'Hara said. "You hired?"

"Make me feel hired," Slot said.

O'Hara counted out five one-hundred dollar bills and laid them on the bar. "The same every week I stay alive."

"You got a long life ahead of you," Slot-Machine said.

O'Hara whistled up his doubles and they left one at a time about three minutes apart. Slot-Machine started to recount the money.

II

SLOT-MACHINE Kelly's feet ached. He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on his desk to rest them. It had been nearly a week

since Frank O'Hara had hired him. He had seen nothing the whole week, and tomorrow the second \$500 was due. All-in-all a good week, with Joe spelling him on the tail, and Slot-Machine's feet began to hurt more when he realized he would have to relieve Joe pretty soon.

Still, it had been so long since he had seen \$1000 in two weeks that the income tax people had almost offered *him* money the last time he'd filed a return. It would be good to buy drinks for Joe, not that he felt guilty about living off Joe. You lived how you could, and if you had to hold your hat in your hand to get a free drink, a hat in the hand was better than an empty glass.

Besides, supporting him was Joe's kick, Joe's way of getting through the days, and Slot-Machine never knocked another man's way of getting through. Everyone had his way out, his gimmick. And he rubbed the stump of his arm with his one hand, just about ready to sigh and get up to go to relieve Joe on the tail, when the door opened and the bald man walked in. The man walked straight up to the desk.

"You Kelly?"

"You buyin' or sellin'?"

"I want to hire Kelly," the bald man said.

"I'm Kelly," Slot-Machine said.

The man sat down. A tall, thin man as bald as an eight ball. But

there was muscle on the thin body, and the man wore no hat despite the cold. Slot-Machine took in the man's expensive clothes and commanding manner.

"What are you doing for Frank O'Hara?" the bald man said.

"I like to know who the hell I'm talkin' to," Slot said.

"Hanley," the man said. "Mike Hanley, I'm exec vice president of O'Hara's stevedoring company. Now what did O'Hara hire you for?"

"Confidential," Slot-Machine said. "It ain't ethical to talk about a client."

"All right," Hanley said, and the bald man reached into his coat pocket.

Slot-Machine hunched his shoulder and reached for his Luger. But the bald man's hand came out of his pocket with a fistful of green bills. Hanley tossed the bills onto the desk.

"Three hundred," Hanley said, "cash. I want to hire you."

Slot-Machine looked at the bills. He could feel his greed watering. "To do what?"

"Tail O'Hara, and report to me everything he does," Hanley said.

Slot-Machine looked at the bills. "You know I can't do that. It's maybe not illegal, but it sure ain't gonna help me keep my license. If O'Hara found out I maybe don't even keep my health. It ain't ethical, I'm workin' for O'Hara."

"Three hundred every week to work for me," Hanley said.

Slot-Machine fought a short battle with his conscience, and reached for the money. Conscience didn't buy booze. Besides, O'Hara was safe as a church, and this \$300 a week Joe wouldn't even know about, and what Joe didn't know wouldn't hurt him. He'd held out on Joe before, it was a hard world.

"Good thing I ain't ethical," Slot said to Hanley.

"I figured," Hanley said dryly. "Okay, now what are you doing for O'Hara?"

"Sort of bodyguard," Slot-Machine said to his new client. And then he explained about the four men and O'Hara's obvious fear. It had crossed his mind that Hanley could be the fourth man, but, then, O'Hara should have told him. And O'Hara had talked like the man out to kill him was sort of a stranger, not his exec vice president.

Hanley listened to the story, and then snorted. "That sounds like a bull story to me, Kelly."

"It is kinda thin," Slot-Machine admitted. "Tell me your story."

"Simple," Hanley said. "Money's been missing from the till, a lot of money, two hundred and fifty thousand dollars so far. O'Hara keeps track of the books, but I pay the accountant to tip me. I want to know where that money is and why."

"It's your money?"

"No, I'm only on salary. O'Hara owns the business all out."

"So he's stealin' his own money," Slot-Machine said.

"Not quite," Hanley said. "The D.A., and the Feds, have been trying to pin something on Frank for years, we've heard they got a case this time. If he goes, I run the company, you get it?"

"I got it," Slot said. "You figure Frank is taking what he can before they boot him out of his own company."

Hanley nodded. "Legally, it's the company's money. We got a Board of Directors and all, even if Frank really handles the company alone. He incorporated, and that makes it the company's money."

"So why not go to the cops?"

Hanley shook his head. "Right now Frank would just say it was working capital, for some deal, he has that right as president. Besides, maybe he didn't take it."

"And he's a mean man."

"Very mean, I been with him a long time," Hanley said. "I just want to keep track of that money for when the fireworks start."

"If he took it," Slot-Machine said.

"Why do you think he hired you? I figure he's got you watching for the Feds and the D.A.'s men so they don't get too close. They'd know his own boys."

"Could be," Slot said, "and

that'd make him kinda not ethical, right?"

Hanley stood up. "I'll expect a report every day."

"I always do what a client wants," Slot-Machine said.

After Hanley had gone, Slot-Machine sat and rubbed his stump thoughtfully. He sighed. People were so crooked. Now here was O'Hara with a story, and Hanley with a story, and maybe both of them were lying.

Hanley could easily want Slot to watch O'Hara because he, Hanley, had taken the \$250,000 and wanted to keep an eye on O'Hara. Then O'Hara's yarn about the strange characters who wanted to kill him sounded fishy, too.

Slot was still thinking about how phony O'Hara's story sounded now, when the telephone rang. He picked up the receiver. It was Joe Harris. "They showed up, at least the big guy did. Get over here!"

"I'm on my way," Slot said into the telephone.

On his way out Slot began to wonder about Hanley, it looked like O'Hara had told a true story, so maybe Hanley was the liar. Then, who cared? As long as they both paid.

III

THE MAN WAS so big he would have made Frank O'Hara look like an under-sized midget. A



giant. Slot-Machine eased back into the doorway beside Joe. He did not want a giant like that to get angry by seeing him. The giant was about fifty feet away on this side of the street. Frank O'Hara's penthouse was in the building across the street. The giant was staring at the doorway of O'Hara's building.

"How long he been here?" Slot whispered to Joe.

"Maybe a half hour," Joe said. "You was late, I'm chargin' you overtime."

"Picket me," Slot-Machine Kelly said.

And then, with the sort of sixth-sense a one-armed man develops to survive on the docks, Slot-Ma-

chine became aware that there were other men watching.

The street was full of watching men.

There was a shadow close against O'Hara's building across the street. A shadow that suddenly lighted a quick match. In the light of the match Slot saw a face with a black eye patch.

Near the corner on Slot's side of the street a man stood under a street lamp. The man paced up and down, and the man had a limp in his left leg.

And, like a twin to Slot and Joe, a figure lurked far back in another doorway on the far side of the street.

Six of them, all together, each immobile as if at a post of guard, while the traffic passed on the street, and the pedestrians hurried to wherever it was legitimate people went. A street full of people and cars in the night, but the people and cars did not count, only the six of them waiting for something. Because, that, Slot realized, was what they were all doing.

And it came. A shot. A single shot high and distant as if from the sky.

The shot came and the watchers moved. They all moved at once. Joe stepped out of the doorway. The giant started to run across the street toward O'Hara's building. The man with the eye patch ran toward the giant. The man with the limp was hobbling

toward the building where O'Hara lived. The man in the far doorway stepped out into the light of a street lamp.

The giant, the eye patch, and the limp all met in front of the building. The man with the eye patch was shouting. For a long moment the three of them stood there. Slot waited in the doorway for the fourth man, the man from the far doorway, to join them. Then the giant, the limp, and the eye patch turned and ran to the nearest corner and vanished.

Slot was about to grab Joe and go after them when he realized that the other man was not with them. He looked for the fourth man. The man was under a street lamp looking up toward O'Hara's penthouse. Slot recognized him. His name was Ed Green, and he was a private detective.

Slot-Machine swore in the night as he realized his mistake. Green was not the mysterious other man O'Hara was afraid of. Slot pushed Joe toward the corner where the three men had vanished.

"Trail them! Quick!" Slot-Machine said.

He ran across the street and into the lobby of the apartment house. The lobby was empty. In the self-service elevator he swore at himself. He should have realized that the three men had been waiting for the fourth—and the fourth was inside the apartment building! And, faint, as if far

above, he thought he heard a second shot.

Slot stepped out into the hall in front of the penthouse. The doors of the elevator closed behind him. In the silence of the hall he heard the elevator move on upwards.

The door to the penthouse was closed. Slot tried the door. It was locked. He knocked loudly but there was no answer. He backed off and kicked the door down.

The apartment was empty. A smell of gunpowder hung in the air. Slot turned and looked at the broken lock on the door. The key was in the lock—on the inside. Slot went through the penthouse room by room. It was empty, all doors were locked on the inside. On the terrace there was no one. But as he looked over the edge he saw, far below, a crowd gathered about something on the sidewalk.

"Checking your handiwork, Kelly?"

The voice came from behind him. He whirled, his hand reaching for his Luger, but even as he turned he recognized the voice. Captain Gazzo stood there. The Homicide detective was not smiling. Neither was Sergeant Jones behind the Captain.

"He's dead, if it worries you," Gazzo said.

"Who?" Slot-Machine said innocently.

"Don't you even ask their names, Kelly?" Sergeant Jonas said.

"The door was locked inside, I kicked it down."

"A kicked-in door can be faked," Jonas said.

Gazzo said, "What's the story, Kelly?"

Slot-Machine gave Gazzo the details, without, of course, mentioning Hanley and his second job. "So I was going after the three of them when it hit me—the shot was up here! So I made it up here fast. I figure you must of found Ed Green down there, he probably saw me, right?"

"He saw you," Gazzo said, "that's the only reason you're not in the paddy wagon already. He says you were there until after the shot."

"He could of heaved the guy off the terrace," Jonas said.

"Could have, but didn't," Slot said. "You know how I hate hard work. Now maybe you can tell me who the corpse is?"

Captain Gazzo looked surprised. "O'Hara, who else?"

"It could of been the other guy," Slot said, and then he groaned. "Kiss bye-bye to five hundred bucks. Some luck I got."

"O'Hara had worse luck," Gazzo said. "Some bodyguard. A man hires you doesn't need an enemy."

"Very funny," Slot said. "Only I'm out a fat fee. Who made the ident?"

"Two of his boys, they were in the lobby," Gazzo said.

"Not when I came through,"

Slot said. "That lobby was as empty as a Met ballpark when the Cubs come in."

"Let's talk to them," Gazzo said.

By the time they reached the street most of the crowd of good citizens had gone on their way in search of the next cheap thrill. The meat wagon was waiting for the body. The Coroner still worked over the corpse. Under the gimlet eye of Lieutenant Jacobs of Homicide, the two doubles for O'Hara were nervous and angry. Slot-Machine walked to the body.

The big man had landed partly on his face. Not that there was much face. Every bone in the body looked broken from the fall, but the fall had not killed him. He had been shot in the back of the head at close range, and half his face had been missing before he took the long trip down. The corpse's shirt had torn wide open, and Slot-Machine looked sourly at the tattooed blue hand on the shoulder with the bullet scar under it. Good-bye \$500.

"What hit him?" Slot asked the Coroner.

The Coroner stood up, rubbed his hands together, and looked down at the corpse appreciatively. "I'd say nine mm, real close, a lovely job, never knew what hit him. Shot probably knocked him over the edge. Neat job, whoever did it."

"You carry a Luger, right

Kelly?" Sergeant Jonas said. "A Luger's nine mm."

"Keep hoping, Jonas," Slot-Machine said. He turned his back to Jonas and walked to where Gazzo was standing with the two big doubles for O'Hara.

"Well?" Gazzo said.

Slot shrugged. "Looks like O'Hara."

"It's Frank, damn you, Kelly," one of the two hoods said.

"Kelly's just worrying about his fee," Gazzo said.

"I'm worryin' about how come these boys wasn't in the lobby when I came through," Slot-Machine said.

The two big men looked annoyed and angry. One of them said, "Just a lousy break. We'd been there maybe three hours watchin' people go in when Frank called down. He wanted some tobacco and some beer. He told us to make it fast, he said we should both go and hurry back."

"That was stupid," Gazzo said.

"Frank told us," the second hoodlum protested.

"Frank was careless," Slot-Machine said.

The first hood snarled, "Maybe he figured you'd protect him, peeper."

Slot-Machine looked thoughtful. "Maybe he did, that was kinda careless, too."

Both hoodlums opened their mouths as if to say something when there was a stir in the group

and Lieutenant Jacobs pushed his way through. Jacobs was grinning and holding tight to Joe Harris.

"Look what I found," Jacobs said.

"Hello, Harris," Gazzo said. "Where'd you hide your three suspicious friends?"

"I lost them," Joe Harris said, and he said to Slot, "A car picked 'em up, big car. There was a big guy in the front seat, and—" Harris stopped as if puzzled.

"And what?" Gazzo snapped.

Harris said to Slot, "I don't know, but I swear there was a kid in the car, too. I mean before the three characters got in."

"A big guy?" Slot-Machine said. "O'Hara said the fourth man was big like him, right?"

"Yeh!" one of the hoods, exclaimed. "Find them, Kelly, all of 'em! You go and find them!"

Gazzo said, "You stay out of it, Kelly."

Slot-Machine shrugged. "I'm out of it, my client's dead, right? No client, no work."

"You stay on the job!" one of the hoods said.

"Who pays me?" Slot-Machine said. "No tickee, no shirtee, as the Chinaman said."

"Why you cheap—" the first hood began.

The second hood stopped him. "We'll pay you, Kelly."

"I'm back on the job," Slot-Machine said.



IV

ED GREEN was not pleased to see Slot-Machine. The small detective looked sour under his RAF-type mustache, and looked at Slot the way you look at a beetle. "I don't talk about clients, Kelly."

"My client's dead," Slot said, "maybe you noticed last night. How about your client. I figure he's dead, too."

"Okay," Green said. "O'Hara hired me, too."

"I figured. I wonder how many of us he bought?"

"He was mighty scared," Green said.

"A big, hard man-like him," Slot said. "What yarn did he give you?"

It was the same story, detail for detail. While Green talked, Slot looked around the small detective's office. It was an old office, exposed pipes and all, but it was better than Slot's office. He began to wonder if he could get Green to work shares with him. But then he dismissed the idea. He might really have to work.

"So," Green finished, "I got the job, and tailed them."

"How about the other one? The leader?"

"Never saw him," Green said.

"You know, O'Hara was damned careless. I mean, he sent those boys of his away at the wrong time, and he went out himself about ten minutes before he got it."

Slot snapped, "He went out? You saw him?"

"Not exactly," Green said. "I saw him go in twice."

"Twice? You're sure it was O'Hara, both times?"

"Of course I'm sure," Green said. "I know Frank, and I was pretty close in that doorway."

"Yeh," Slot said. "Well, got any ideas?"

He said the last hopefully. Maybe Green would come up with some ideas and save him a lot of work. Slot had no objection to making his money the easy way.

But Green had no ideas. Green was off the case, and Slot left.

In the street he stopped to think. At the edge of the curb his eyes searched the gutter for any loose change. Once he had found a ten dollar bill. That had been a happy day. But there was nothing in the gutter this time, and it looked like he was going to have to work.

Only he needed a lead. He could search the town for his three suspicious characters, talk to some stoolies, but that could take weeks. He needed a short-cut, a solid lead, and he had a strong idea that the lead was somewhere in O'Hara's past twenty-five years ago. A killer had to have a good reason to hate for twenty-five years.

He hailed a taxi and rode to the waterfront offices of the O'Hara Stevedoring Company, Inc. The blonde receptionist looked with pity at his missing arm.

"I lent it to a friend," Slot said to the blonde. "He was left-handed, he needed it."

The blonde blushed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Tell Hanley Mr. Patrick Xavier Kelly is here," Slot said, "and what you got planned for tonight, sister?"

The blonde bristled. "Do you have an appointment?"

"You'd be surprised what I can do with one arm, honey!" Slot leered at the blonde.

"If you think you—"

"Okay, okay, you're loss, girlie," Slot said. "Now lower the gates, Hanley knows me."

Hanley was behind a desk about half as long as the Queen Mary. The bald man was all business. "What can I do for you, Kelly?"

"I'm reportin', remember?"

"Forget it," Hanley said. "No problems now."

"You found the money?" Slot asked.

Hanley shook his head. "No, but with Frank dead it really doesn't matter."

"You mean with O'Hara dead it looks like maybe he didn't take the money?" Slot said. "Maybe you got the company and the money."

Hanley stood up abruptly. "Beat it, Kelly!"

"Easy, easy," Slot grinned. "You need me, Hanley. Now the cops'd love to know about you hiring me, you know? I mean, maybe you stole the money and killed O'Hara when he found out. You hired me to tail him to keep an eye on him."

Hanley sat down. "What do you want? Blackmail?"

"Well, that's not a bad idea. Did you steal the money?"

"No."

"Okay, I'll believe you for now," Slot said. "Tell me all about O'Hara."

"He started the company twenty-three years ago. It went

great guns right from the start. You know the rest."

"Before that," Slot said.

"Who knows? He showed up here one day and started the company. I think maybe he was a sailor before that."

"A sailor with enough loot to start a company and make a go of it right off?" Slot said.

"That's the way it was," Hanley said.

"Okay," Slot said. "He got the money to start with from somewhere. It figures. That kind of money might be worth rememberin' for twenty-five years. Where'd he come from?"

Hanley shook his head again. "Can't help you. Frank never did have a past. The only thing I remember is that he said something once at a party. He was drunk, and he got to talking about Africa, and he said, 'The Congo's a bloody river.'"

"The Congo?"

"Where they just had all the fireworks," Hanley said.

Slot rubbed the stump of his arm. The Congo. It could be something, or it could be nothing. There was one thing about the four men O'Hara had been afraid of, they all sounded like sailors. And they were all about O'Hara's age. Maybe Green would remember more if he asked about the Congo.

"Don't go anywheres, Hanley," Slot said. "I maybe'll have to

throw you to Gazzo yet. You're sure you ain't got that quarter of a million? I mean, I'll take about one-third and I never heard of you."

"Get out of here, Kelly!"

Slot grinned at the bald man and left. He patted the blonde receptionist on the shoulder as he passed. Her look would have frozen the Equator. He caught another taxi and went back to Green's office.

As he walked into the small detective's inner office he had one quick glimpse of Green slumped over the desk before it all went dark.

It went dark after the pain. And the pain came from a very solid object contacting his skull.

V

SLOT-MACHINE Kelly came awake. He was lying on a floor. It took him a few minutes to decide what floor he was on. Then he remembered, and looked for Ed Green. The small detective was still lying on his desk.

Slot stumbled to his feet and staggered to Green. The small man was still breathing. Green's left shoulder was a bloody mess. The result of a close-range nine mm bullet, from the look of it. There was another hole in Green's chest. Slot called Gazzo.

By the time the Captain from Homicide arrived with his crew,

Slot had searched Green's office from one end to the other and found nothing. Green kept neat, accurate records, but in the file on Frank O'Hara there was nothing Slot did not know.

"He'll live," Gazzo said after they had taken Green away. "Let's hear it all, Kelly."

Slot told Gazzo the whole thing, what he knew about it, which was not much. As Slot explained, "I went to sleep pretty fast when I walked in, Gazzo."

"Too bad he didn't hit harder," Gazzo said. "What you think it's all about?"

"Shut him up," Slot said, "what else. Those shots was meant to kill."

"What did Green know?"

"Nothin'," Slot said. "At least not that he told me."

Gazzo lighted a cigarette and sat down in the chair behind the desk. "It stinks, Kelly. O'Hara had a lot of enemies—hoods, the syndicate, all of it. But they all check out clean. The D.A. was after him, almost had him I hear, just a matter of weeks before he closed in. I'd figure it was someone in his company, but the D.A. says the company's clean, too. It was just Frank they had pinned down for crooked dealings.

"The kicker is we can't figure how he got killed. I mean, how the killer got into a locked apartment, and got out again. I figured the terrace, but the only way to get

up to the roof garden is an awning fixture and a drain pipe. They wouldn't hold anyone over ninety pounds soaking wet, we tested them."

"You got a motive at least?" Slot asked.

"No motive even," Gazzo said.

"I mean, it stinks."

"Green knew something," Slot said. "Or at least the killer thought he did."

"You're a big help, Kelly," Gazzo said.

"I aims to please," Slot said. "Can I go now?"

"Get out of here," Gazzo said in disgust.

Slot-Machine was thirsty. He'd worked almost half the day, not to mention the bump on his head, he felt he deserved a drink. And, anyway, he wanted to think. Green had known something, but whatever it was Green knew, Green didn't even know he knew.

All the way to the saloon where Joe Harris worked, Slot sat in the taxi wondering what Green knew, and why he, Slot, hadn't been shot. Whatever Green knew, he probably knew. The only explanation was that the guy who had hit him didn't know him. That meant he had not been spotted by the four men. If it was the four men, Hanley would know him, but, then, Hanley could hire a strong-arm type who maybe didn't know Slot.

When he walked in to Joe's



saloon he ordered Bourbon. Joe made him pay for it. It had been a bad day all around.

"What I don't figure is how that killer got in past you and Green," Slot said to Joe.

"Ain't nobody went in that lobby except O'Hara, his two doubles. O'Hara went in twice."

"Green said that. O'Hara went in twice. Maybe you saw him come out?"

"Nope, just go in," Joe said.

"You and Green both couldn't of been star-gazin'. How did he get out? Maybe it wasn't O'Hara

the second time." Slot looked speculatively at his reflection in the bar mirror. "Frank said the other guy did look like him."

"Same clothes, same size, same walk, same face."

"Yeh," Slot said. "Size, I buy, same walk, okay, and at that distance a lot of faces look alike. What I don't get is the same clothes. I mean, if anyone got that close to Frank you or me would of seen him, right?"

"Right," Joe said, "and you still got a locked penthouse and a drainpipe couldn't hold a man as big as O'Hara."

"Maybe he had a midget friend," Slot said.

"There was that kid I thought I saw in the car," Joe said.

"Yeh," Slot said, "that kid. Maybe our killer brought his kid to help."

"What an imagination," Joe said.

- Slot sighed, the work was tiring his brain. Joe had to pour for paying customers, and Slot sat looking at his own face and drinking until it was dark outside and the night crowd of drunks and shysters and grifters had started to drift into the saloon.

He was trying to decide whether to stay drinking, or go scare up a crap game for the night, when the telephone rang in the back. Joe went to answer. The whisky had made Slot feel better. Joe came up and made him feel worse again.

"That was Gazzo," Joe said. "They found one of our three boys. The big guy. He was floatin' in the river. Gazzo says he don't look so big no more, he wants you should take a look."

Slot took a cab to the morgue. Gazzo was waiting for him. The Captain was getting madder by the minute. Gazzo said, "All I got is corpses and no killer. I don't even know how this one got killed. Coroner says full autopsy. I say nuts!"

"Looks like our killer don't like witnesses," Slot said. "What you find on him?"

"About five dollars cold cash, a clasp knife, a plug of chew, a hotel room key, and sort of carved doll."

"Doll? Ain't he kinda big for playin' with dolls?"

"Looks like a good luck charm," Gazzo said. "See?"

Gazzo held it out to him. A small, black doll about the size of a rabbit's foot. Hand carved and good. A grinning little idol. Slot held the doll and began to think about the Congo.

"Let's see the body," Slot said.

Gazzo nodded to the attendant who lifted the sheet. The big man was not pretty. His face was contorted into a rigid grimace. There did not seem to be a mark on him. But it was not the face, or the marks, that made Slot-Machine stare at the corpse. On the right shoulder he saw a four inch tattoo. The tattoo of a blue hand.

"Yeh," Gazzo said, "the same tattoo. So?"

"I don't know," Slot said, "but I got an idea."

"Everybody got an idea," Gazzo said. "So tell me."

Slot shook his head. "I ain't sure. Only Frank forgot to tell me there was any more tattoos like his. Come to think of it, he forget to tell Green. You think maybe there's more?"

"So what if there is?"

"I ain't sure, Captain," Slot said. "I'll let you know when I figure it out."

"You do that."

A blue hand. Two identical tattoos. And may be Frank O'Hara had just forgotten to tell him, or maybe Frank O'Hara had a reason for not telling. A blue hand, a carved doll, and the Congo. Maybe it was nothing. Only O'Hara, and four other guys, had to have come from somewhere. Some place where the four guys had found a reason bad enough to wait twenty-five years to kill.

Slot walked out of the morgue. He sighed in the night. Tomorrow looked like a day of work.

VI

IT TOOK THREE days of work. At the end of the three days Slot had what he wanted, but he was very tired. It had taken a day in the main library poring over old newspaper microfilms, a day talk-

ing to the Belgian people, half a day with the new Congo people, and another half day in the library. But he had it. Only he didn't know yet what he had.

Slot said to Joe Harris, "I got it, the motive, only it don't change much, you know?"

"You figure they all got that blue hand tattoo?" Joe said.

"All of 'em, those Congo prison records said so. They was all off the same ship. They must of planned it. There was six of them. They had this race riot in Stanleyville, and while everyone was shooting, these six guys hauled off with about a half-million dollars in diamonds.

"It was a big haul, made all the papers back then. Four of them got caught and sent up for life 'cause they killed some native guards on the haul. They would of got away, all of them, only some-one ratted to the cops. Two got away. They found one of the two dead a few days later, but they never found the diamonds. The new Government down there let the four guys out six months ago."

"The one got away was Frank O'Hara?" Joe said.

Slot nodded. "I figure that. He had a different name then, Frank Sullivan. The Belgian cops traced him as far as Singapore in those days, then they lost him. Besides, the guys in jail never talked, and they couldn't of proved it was Frank who got away.

"Only the description fits, and they all had that blue hand tattoo. The four guys waited twenty-five years to get Frank. Looks like they made it. What I don't figure, is why the big guy got killed? I mean, Gazzo says nothin' was missin' from Frank's place. They didn't get away with nothin', so they couldn't of had a fight over the loot."

"Twenty-five years is a long time," Joe said. "I mean, five hundred thousand dollars is a lot of dough, and ratting on friends ain't nice, but twenty-five years in jail oughta cool folks down some."

Slot stared at his face in the mirror. "I guess I forgot to tell you their names. The big guy was Max Perkins. The one-eyed guy is Blinky O'Donnell, and the one with the limp is Pat Adamson."

Slot turned his eyes toward Joe Harris. "The other guy in jail is Mike Sullivan, and the one who got away but got killed two days later was Tim Sullivan."

Slot sat there and drank for a long time in silence. Joe poured. Joe poured a double shot for himself. After a time, Joe poured himself another double, and said, "So six guys made a big haul, Frank O'Hara, or Sullivan, ratted on them all, left three friends and a brother to rot in a Congo jail, killed a second brother, and ran with the loot."

Slot nodded slowly. "A real nice guy, Big Frank."

"Maybe he deserved killing," Joe said. "I guess I'd remember twenty-five years."

"Yeh," Slot said. "Let Gazzo find them guys. I guess it'll be easy enough. Gazzo sent for pictures and prints on the three left, he's got all the seamen's hirin' halls covered, they got to show sooner or later."

"So that's it," Joe said. "I guess it was that Mike Sullivan, or O'Hara, or whatever he calls himself, I saw go in the apartment house the second time."

"Must have been," Slot said. "Come on, Joe boy, they stopped makin' the booze? I'm dry. Buy one on the house."

"Boss is watchin'," Joe said, "slip me some loose pennies anyhow. I guess Gazzo thanked you for getting him his motive and the names."

"Gazzo wouldn't thank Santa Claus," Slot said. "Pour."

"Okay, okay," Joe said. Joe poured. He had one eye on the boss who was watching suspiciously. "I still don't figure how he got out of the place, Mike Sullivan, I mean. He's as big as Frank was, you said."

Slot shrugged. "Maybe he had help, that kid, or midget, or whatever you saw in the car. Come to think of it, I sort of remember a second shot, and that elevator was going up when I got out, the killer was on the roof, and—" Slot stopped.

He stared at his face in the mirror. "You know, how would Mike Sullivan know about that elevator goin' on up to the roof? And how would he know he could get up there at all?"

"He cased the joint," Joe said.

"No!" Slot shook his head. "I'd of seen him. Frank's address wasn't listed nowhere, Frank was too careful for that." And Slot stood up. "I'll be back."

Hanley would have known about the roof and the elevator. Slot decided he would ask Hanley a few more questions. There was still something very smelly about the whole set-up. For a scared man Frank O'Hara, or Sullivan if that was his real name, had been very careless about it all, unless O'Hara had had no reason to suspect the man who killed him.

As he walked across town toward the river, Slot decided that Big Frank had been very, very careless. Unless maybe someone else, not Mike Sullivan, had taken advantage of the whole Congo bit to kill O'Hara and blame it on Mike and the other Congo men. He was thinking like that, mulling it all over, when he noticed the shadow.

The sun was to his left toward the river. The shadow was directly in front of him at the mouth of a narrow alley. A regular shadow as he walked toward it, but—too small! Like the shadow of a kid. And something seemed



to be sticking out of the head of the shadow. Like a kid with a beanshooter in his mouth.

Slot watched the strange little shadow, and then it moved, the shadow. A kid with a beanshooter moving out of the alley toward the street just where Slot would pass. And then Slot saw it, the face. A small, black face with wild, red-streaked eyes. The beanshooter in its mouth was aimed right at Slot. And then Slot saw it all!

He dived to the pavement. His shoulder smashed hard on the concrete. Pain shot through his stump. And he heard a sound like a sharp puff of breath, and a faint click on the sidewalk behind him. Then he was up and running. In the alley and running after the figure of the tiny black man who was nearly to the far end of the alley.

The black man, Pygmy, because that was what the man was, went over a fence like a cat. Slot scrambled after the man. As he raised his head above the fence he had another glimpse of the wild face looking straight at him, the blow-gun pointed, Slot ducked. This time the dart stuck in the fence

just below where his head had been.

The Pygmy turned and ran again. Slot went over the fence after the Pygmy. As he ran he thought about this strangest Pygmy he'd ever seen. The little man couldn't be more than four feet tall, the wizened face of all Pygmies, and yet the man wore normal Western clothes.

Slot went down the back yards of the houses, over fences, warily, until the Pygmy went up a small tree and over a high fence. Slot stopped then. The tree would not hold his weight.

But under the tree Slot found a key. A hotel room key. Hotel Marsden. Slot walked back to the street and turned toward where he knew the Hotel Marsden was. The Marsden was a cheap flop for sailors and carnival workers who worked the 42nd Street and Coney Island clip joints.

As usual at the Marsden the desk clerk was missing. Slot slid through the lobby and up the stairs to the third floor where the room of the key was, Room 339. Slot fitted the key and pushed the door open quickly. The room was empty. The Pygmy was a smart man. He had probably missed the key, and he was not coming back to the room.

There was not much to come back to in the room. Slot found a small suitcase with a few extra clothes. The clothes were expen-

sive, and they had a tailor's label from Stanleyville. He found, in a drawer, a leather bag of wicked little blow-gun darts. Extras, he thought grimly, the Pygmy probably carried a good supply.

There were some Coney Island trinkets, a large bag of cheap beads, and a slip of paper with the address of Frank O'Hara's penthouse on it. It was the other three addresses on the slip of paper that made Slot turn and run for the door. One of the three addresses was the same hotel where the dead giant had lived.

Slot headed for the other two addresses on the run.

VII

IT WAS DARK outside Homicide Headquarters. Captain Grazzo sat behind his desk in the dim light of the single lamp. The Captain looked like a man who had seen a ghost and didn't believe in ghosts.

"A Pygmy?" Gazzo said. The tone of his voice was not exactly one of disbelief, it was more of amazement.

"We should of figured it," Slot said. "The only way out of that apartment was up that awning and drain pipe."

Gazzo nodded. "That big guy, Perkins, it all checks out now. The Coroner reported he was poisoned, some nerve poison. The Doc said it looked like a hypo-

dermic in the neck, only I couldn't figure how anyone got close enough to a guy that big to jab him with a hypo. Now we know. A blow-gun dart."

"He must have come from the Congo with them," Slot said. "Too bad I was too late for the other two when I went to their places."

Because Kelly could still see them. The man with the eye-patch, O'Donnell, bolt upright in the chair when Slot had broken in. Dead with the dart sticking out of his neck. And the man with the limp, Adamson, rigid as a board on the floor of the second address on the Pygmy's list.

"That's all of them," Slot said, "all three, except Mike Sullivan."

"I can count," Gazzo said. "He won't get far. You can't hide a Pygmy, and we got a full description on Mike Sullivan."

Slot rubbed at the stump of his arm. "I still don't get it. Why? You know? Unless—"

"You got an idea?"

"Maybe Mike intends to go back for some loot. Maybe he knows where it is."

"We got a twenty-four hour tail on all of O'Hara's boys, and a stake-out on the apartment." And Gazzo looked suddenly puzzled. He said, "Funny thing, I forgot to tell you, we found a slug in the wall of the apartment. A forty-five slug, kind of high up. You hear a second shot from up there?"

Slot nodded. "Yeh, I heard

what I thought was a second shot. It was muffled, like, as if it was silenced."

"That explains it," Gazzo said.

"Yeh," Slot said. "Maybe. So who fired it?"

"Who cares? It missed," Gazzo said.

"Yeh," Slot said. "You know, Gazzo, I'd still like to know how Mike Sullivan and that Pygmy found O'Hara and knew about the roof elevator. Frank wasn't that easy to get to."

"Somebody tipped them," Gazzo said.

"That's the way I figure it. I think I'll take a walk. When you get that report on the Pygmy from Stanleyville, call me."

"Okay, Kelly, I guess you got it coming," Gazzo said.

Once outside Slot-Machine went straight to a telephone in the nearest saloon. He called Mike Hanley. The bald man was not in his office this late. Slot called Hanley's home. The vice president answered himself. Hanley was annoyed.

"I told you to stop bothering me!"

"Or you'll go to the cops?" Slot said into the receiver. "Knock it off, Hanley. I got a riddle for you. What does Hanley and Stanley have in common?"

The bald man's voice was angry. "Get off my back, Kelly."

"Tell me, is there a Hanleyville anywhere?"

This time there was only silence at the other end of the line. Then Hanley said, "Okay, Kelly, come on over here."

All the way to Hanley's Park Avenue apartment Slot-Machine thought it all over. It would fit. Hanley had taken the money from the company, Hanley wanted his boss out of the way. It would fit.

The bald vice president was waiting in his living room. Slot-Machine wasted no time.

"So you knew about the Congo all along?"

The bald man admitted it. "Okay, I put two-and-two together just like you did. Frank was scared to death of his brother and those other men. I was worried about the company, so I hired you to watch Frank. I was afraid he'd take a run out, or maybe bleed the company to pay off his brother."

"I believe you," Slot-Machine said. "I always believe my clients, but maybe Gazzo won't. Somebody tipped off the brother and the Pygmy about how to get Frank."

"Not me," Hanley said. "Listen, when Frank took that trip to the Congo about a year ago I followed him. That trip cost a lot of money and there was no company reason for it. So I went over, too. That's how I found out about Frank's brother."

"You went to Stanleyville?"

"I did. Frank saw his brother

there. That was when he found out Mike was getting out. I guess he couldn't make a deal."

"Maybe you did?"

Hanley was frightened now. "I didn't kill Frank!"

"You just helped Mike and the Pygmy do it," Slot said.

"No! Listen, Kelly, it was just all that missing money! I mean, when it started going out I wanted to know why, that was all! You got to believe me!"

The bald man was scared, really scared. Slot-Machine could not decide if Hanley was scared because he was innocent, or because he was guilty. If it was Hanley, it would make sense to get rid of all the men from the Congo. If it was Hanley, the next body could be that of Mike Sullivan. But maybe it wasn't Hanley.

Slot said, "When did that money start vanishing from the company?"

"About six months ago," Hanley said. "Why?"

"Maybe Frank wanted it to make a deal with his brother."

Hanley was eager. "I think you've got it, Kelly! Sure, that would fit just right. The brother got out of prison about six months ago."

Slot said, "Then why did the brother kill Frank?"

Hanley hesitated, then blurted out, "Frank tried to double-cross him, that would be like Frank!"

"It could be," Slot admitted.

"Okay, Hanley, just don't go anywhere."

Slot left the bald man still shaking. But Slot walked carefully down the street. If it was Hanley, Slot didn't want to be the next corpse on the Pygmy's list. But nothing happened, and Slot made it to a taxi and went home to get some sleep. All the way across town to his room he was bothered by something that buzzed in his mind and wouldn't settle down.

VIII

SLOT-MACHINE awoke with a start. The sun was high outside his window. Joe Harris was snoring in the next bed. And the buzzing in his mind had settled down. It was a question: Why had Frank O'Hara been killed with a 9 mm bullet? Why any bullet? All the others had died from a blow gun dart.

Slot jumped out of bed and went fast to the telephone. Gazzo didn't wait for him to speak. The Captain was boiling like superheated steam.

"We found him and lost him! That damned Pygmy! Some police force I got to run. Spotted him early this morning up by City Island, had him dead to rights, and he skinned through a hole in a boathouse. My fat cops couldn't make it! By the time they got around the front, no Pygmy!"

"City Island?" Slot said.

"Yeh, maybe he's figurin' on swimmin' back to the Congo. I got the report. No trouble at all. Do they know maybe a Pygmy who'd be over here? I think they almost laughed. Gave me name, rank, and serial number in nothin' flat. Name's Mbola, calls himself Peter Mbola, and he's got a record as long as the Congo River. Seems it's so damned rare for a Pygmy to even leave the jungle, much less go Western. Mbola is the only Pygmy they know ain't killing lions."

"What else," Slot said. "I mean, how come Peter Mbola is over here?"

Gazzo seemed to be strangling on the other end of the phone. "They don't know. Mbola showed up with a lot of money about a year, ten months ago. Was a good boy for maybe six months, then vanished. They been lookin' for him. Ain't that a help?"

"Maybe it is," Slot said. "Listen, Gazzo, did you run an autopsy on Frank O'Hara?"

Gazzo was silent. Then the Captain's voice said cautiously, "Should we?"

Slot said, "I just got a hunch. I mean, if you got a blow-gun, and you use it, why change to a messy gun? I mean, it was that shot brought me runnin', you know? A blow-gun I'd still be standin' down in that street watchin'. I sure wouldn't have heard it."

Gazzo's voice was ominous. "You better get down here, Kelly, I mean it."

Slot heard the warning. "Why?"

"Because I had that autopsy run last night," Gazzo said. "Seems we had the same idea, if yours is a guess not personal information. You better come and talk."

"What really killed him, Gazzo."

"You guessed it, the same poison. Coroner found the mark on his neck, too."

"Where on the neck?"

"What?"

"I said, where on the neck," Slot said.

"The back. Right under the hair line in the back."

"I'll call you later," Slot said, and he hung up.

He stood there in the sunny room with Joe snoring behind him and thought for a long minute. Then he picked up the telephone again. The voice that answered this time said, "Doctor's Hospital."

"Let me talk to Ed Green," Slot said.

Green's voice was very weak. Slot said hello and then said, "One question, Green. Did O'Hara let you see that tattoo real plain?"

"The blue hand? He sure did. He showed me what the guy who was after him had done to him."

"Thank's, Green, kiss a nurse for me."

Slot-Machine hung up and

turned to Joe. He shook his best friend. Joe woke up with a start, saw Slot, and began to swear. "I was on the night shift, Slot, let me sleep!"

"I got a question."

"Awright, go ahead."

"You remember seein' that kid, the Pygmy, go into O'Hara's apartment?"

Joe groaned. "I told you already I didn't see no one except Frank, or maybe the brother dressed up just like Frank. Now go away." And Joe turned over onto his face and began to snore at once.

Slot sat on the edge of the bed. He reached toward the telephone again. He had it now, and he should tell Gazzo. But his hand came away from the phone. Maybe he was wrong, and if he was wrong Gazzo would hang him. He stood up and dressed. Then he left the room, walked down the stairs into the street, and hailed a cab.

"City Island," he told the driver.

The driver started to swear. Slot grinned at the back of the irate driver's head. The driver mumbled to himself all the way up the East River Drive, across the bridge, and through the Bronx.

By the time they reached City Island the driver was still talking to himself. Slot got out, paid, and gave the driver a dime.

"A dime!" the driver screamed. "You lousey bum."

Slot just walked away.

He walked slowly and carefully, but straight down to a large dock on the north side of the island. The boat was there. It was where Frank O'Hara had always kept his boat. The police had searched it the day after the murder. That made it a very good hideout for a killer.

Slot worked his way carefully to the edge of the water out of sight from the boat. He stepped into a rowboat, untied it, and slowly paddled to the seaward side of O'Hara's boat. He left the rowboat and climbed aboard. There were voices in the cabin. About now Slot was cursing himself for not calling Gazzo.

He lay there listening to the voices. They were speaking French. Slot wrestled with his well-developed sense of self-preservation. He lost. He started to crawl back to the edge of the boat. If he had to swim, and if he gave them time to get away, he was going to call Gazzo.

He was too late. A small, black head emerged from below. The Pygmy came out onto the deck. In another second the Pygmy would see Slot. Slot sighed to himself and lunged to his feet.

The edge of his hand caught the Pygmy on the back of the neck. The little man went down without a gurgle.

Slot dived down the stairs, kicked open the cabin door, and fell inside with his Luger ready.

The big man stared at him. Slot got to his feet, the Luger pointed at the big man's chest.

"Hello, friend," Slot said.

The big man just stood there. He was as big as Frank O'Hara, about the same age, the same height, the same grey hair. Only this man was wearing a grey beard and a thick grey mustache.

"Who the hell are you?" the big man wanted to know.

"Phony beard and all," Slot said. "Now you didn't have a beard the day of the murder, did you? Joe Harris and Ed Green would of seen it."

"Murder?" the big man said. "What murder."

Slot grinned. "Funny you should ask that. Open your shirt."

"Now you listen you stupid—" The big man was very angry. He even made a motion toward his coat. Slot waved his Luger, and the man stopped moving.

"That's better, now open that shirt," Slot said.

The big man opened his shirt. The tattoo of the blue hand seemed to shine in the sunlight through the portholes. Slot looked carefully at the tattoo.

Slot said, "No scar, that's what I figured. A nice, clean blue hand."

The big man sagged. "Okay, you win, mister. It was Frank had the scar. But I didn't kill him. It was Mbolà. He killed all of them, you hear? I just wanted to scare

Frank, make a deal, get some of the money. I guess you know about the money. I mean, Frank was a big man, I didn't want Mbola to kill him. That little savage just got to kill, I tried—"

Slot shook his head slowly in the cabin. "Maybe you're right, but you brought Mbola here, mister. Now maybe the police will—"

And Slot suddenly reached out, caught the beard, and pulled hard. Then he grinned again. He said, "Well hello, Frank, long time no see."

The big man, Frank O'Hara himself, just stood there. Slot-Machine said, "See, I do got brains after all, right? I didn't get it right away, O'Hara, but after a while I got to thinking that it was Mike, your poor dear brother, who was shot back there in the Congo. So it figured he had the real scar, the one you showed me and Green must of been a phony just for us."

The big man said, "Okay, Kelly, you got me. Look, I got a lot of money, I'll pay you, anything you say. It really was Mbola who killed Mike and the others. I'll give Mbola to you, you can let me go, right? I'll make you rich, Kelly. You like a buck. Take Mbola, they won't believe a lousy little—Get him, Mbola!"

Slot heard the sound a split second before O'Hara shouted. A faint sound. Slot went over sideways, his Luger coming around toward the door. But he would

have been a lot too late. The Pygmy had his blow-gun leveled and Slot would have been a dead man. If the Pygmy had been aiming at him, Mbola wasn't aiming at him. Mybola was aiming at Frank O'Hara.

Mbola spat. "*Lache! Cochon!*"

Frank O'Hara did not even have time to be scared. The dart caught him full in the throat. O'Hara shivered where he stood. Slot-Machine turned his Luger toward Mbola. But the Pygmy was gone, vanished with the speed of a snake. By the time Slot turned back to Frank O'Hara, the big man was lying on the floor a rigid grin on his dead face.

IX

LATER, AFTER Gazzo had come and gone, after they had cornered the Pygmy in a sail loft on City Island and the police had gone in and pulled Mbola out writhing like a snake, Slot-Machine sat at the bar and sighed with pleasure as he drank off his fourth Bourbon.

Joe Harris looked disgusted. "For one free whisky you get shot at with blow-guns. It'll get you yet, that thirst."

"Women or whisky," Slot said. "Us guys with brains always go that way."

"Awright," Joe said, "dazzle me, tell me how you done it?"

"Like I told Gazzo, I smelled

it from the start, the body havin' no face 'an' all."

"Don't kid me. You smelled nothin' from the start but five bills."

Slot grinned. "Okay, so I got lucky. I mean, I did kinda wonder about Big Frank bein' so careless like, and I wondered some about Frank bein' so scared he hired both me and Green when he had his own boys. Then it was funny he never said all of them had that same tattoo, you know?"

"But what really started me thinkin' was why anyone would kill all of them. I mean, if Mike had killed Big Frank, why kill his own buddies? If it was Frank had killed Mike, then it'd make sense, right? Then there was the real stink, how did Mike and Mbola know all about Frank's penthouse? See?"

"Slot," Joe said, "you are one lucky guesser!"

"Yeh, ain't I? Only it just had to be Frank. When you come down to it, he was the only logical one. The D.A. was after him, his brother was after him, and he figured out a scheme to stop his brother and get away from the D.A. He was goin' to vanish and take that quarter of a million bucks with him. He set it up when he went to the Congo. He hired Mbola to get in with Mike, and he talked Mike into comin' to New York for a payoff. After twenty-five years, Mike and his

friends figured some money to get started again was better than revenge. Poor Mike."

"You figured all that out by yourself?" Joe said.

Slot shrugged. "Mbola told us after we caught him."

"We?" Joe said. "Gazzo said you was hiding under a boat."

"I'm the thinkin' type."

"Tell me more," Joe said.

"You pour, I tell more," Slot said. He watched Joe pour another Bourbon. He tasted it. "We all figured Mike was dressed up like Frank, only it was Frank who was dressed like Mike, see? Mbola tipped off Frank about what to wear so the body would look like Mike. You said Mbola didn't go into the apartment, so he had to be already there, right? That meant he was working for Frank, not Mike."

"Mbola spilled it. Frank arranged for Mike to come for a payoff. Mbola and Frank was ready. Only Mike saw what was happening and pulled his gun. The shot went wild because Mbola got him with the blow gun in the back of the neck. Then they blew Mike's face off with a Luger, and dumped him over the ledge for good measure. That was the silenced shot I heard."

"Only they heard me and had to move fast. Frank went out the side way, Mbola locked the doors and skinned up to the roof. Frank looked enough like Mike to meet

the other guys in a dark car with Mbola with him. Then he got them one at a time. He figured on beating it when the heat was off, and he had his dough."

"Slot," Joe Harris said, "you just figured most of that out right here with the booze."

"Ain't that the truth," Slot said. And he said, "You think maybe we could sue Frank's estate for a couple more weeks fee?"

Joe did not even answer that one. He poured another Bourbon without a word. Slot drank it off and sighed happily.



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HOLD UP

by DAN SONTUP

THEY CAME IN quietly, and I didn't know they were in the roadhouse until Al glanced up from behind the bar and said, "Look at that, George."

I swung around on the bar stool and there they were—the young punk with the bushy red hair, and the blonde girl in the tight jeans.

Al and I waited while they walked up to the bar. We were alone in the place. The last of the help had just gone home, and Al and I had been having a final beer and some small talk before he closed for the night.

"Sorry," Al said to them. "We're closed."

They looked at each other, and the girl smiled. "That's what I call real good timing, Chuck," she said to the punk.

He grinned back at her. It was a wide, foolish grin, big enough to show his two missing molars.

"We're closed," Al said again.

Neither of them made a move. "Okay," Al said. He placed both hands on the bar and leaned forward. "I'll tell you just one more time. *The place is closed.* Now go on and get out of here."

She smiled directly at him, a slow smile that just curled the corners of her mouth. "The man says he's closed, Chuck," she said softly. "What about that?"

Chuck grinned again. "He's right, Joan. The man is absolutely right. He's closed for the night."

Al started to move out from behind the bar, and Joan's hand slid swiftly into the pocket of her jeans and came out with a snub-nosed

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revolver. She held it loosely in her hand, slowly swinging it back and forth from Al to me.

"Don't do anything foolish," she said.

Al's eyes widened, and he said, "What is this?"

"Just come out here in front, mister," Joan said.

Al looked at me, and I nodded slightly. He walked around the bar and came over and stood next to me.

"I think you'd better give me that gun," I said, making my voice as stern as I could. "I'm a police officer."

Joan looked at me and giggled.

I got off the bar stool and stood up, conscious of the weight of my gun on my hip. "You can get into a lot of trouble for what you're doing," I said.

Joan giggled again and swung the gun so it pointed right at my stomach. "Get his gun, Chuck," she said.

Chuck walked around in back of me. I felt his hand snake in under my jacket. He lifted my gun from its holster, and then his hands patted my pockets. He took out the little leather holder in which I had my badge and identification card.

He came around in front of me, tucking my gun into his belt, and he handed the leather holder to Joan.

"All right," Joan said, motioning to me. "You go lock the door. And

don't try anything funny or Chuck will take good care of you."

I turned and walked to the door with Chuck in back of me. He waited while I locked the door, his hands hanging loosely at his side, the butt of the gun sticking up out of his belt. He nodded at me and motioned with his head, and I walked back and stood next to Al.

Joan held her gun on Al with one hand and flipped open the leather holder with her other hand. She looked at the badge and the ID card and grinned. "Well, Georgie, you're not much of a cop." She slipped the holder into her pocket.

"The name is George," I said.

"Sure, Georgie."

Al looked at me, then swung back to Joan. "You kids are crazy," he said angrily. "You can't take a cop's gun away from him."

Joan laughed. "We already did."

Chuck laughed along with her, and Al glared at both of them.

"All right," Joan said, "let's all go into the back room now."

I shrugged my shoulders and started walking. Al hesitated for a moment, then joined me. Joan and Chuck brought up the rear.

"Open the door slowly," Joan said in back of us.

I did as she said.

"Now reach in and switch on the light," Joan said.

I groped for the light switch and flicked it on.

"Inside," Joan ordered.

We walked in, and I heard the door shut in back of us. I turned around and faced them. Al stood next to me, his face grim.

"What's this all about?" Al said.

"What does it look like?" Joan said, and Chuck laughed.

Al looked at me, and I could see a small flicker of worry deep in his eyes.

"All right," Joan said, "get the money."

"What money?" Al said quickly.

"Look," Joan snapped, "don't get wise with me. I want the money you've got in the strong box in that desk drawer."

Al's face went suddenly pale. He looked at me helplessly.

"Better do as she says," I told him.

He looked at the gun in her hand, then turned slowly and went behind the desk.

"Just the strong box," Joan said.

"And don't try anything funny when you take it out, either."

Al opened the bottom desk drawer slowly and took out the strong box and placed it on top of the desk.

"Open it," Joan said.

Al reached into his pocket.

"Careful now," Joan said.

Al withdrew his hand slowly, holding his key ring in his fingers. He selected a key and opened the box.

"Take out the money," Joan said.

Al scooped up the money and put it on the desk. Joan walked over to the desk, looked inside the box to make sure it was empty, then said, "Count the money out into two equal piles."

Al looked at her for a moment. Then he picked up the money and counted it out into two equal piles, his lips moving silently as he counted.

"That's fine," Joan said, smiling. "That's just fine, Al."

He stared down at the money.

"Now get two envelopes," Joan said, "and put the money in them."

Al opened another desk drawer and took out two large white envelopes. He put one pile of money in each envelope.

"That's a good boy," Joan said. "Now just go stand over there in the corner." She motioned with the gun.

Al walked over to the corner and turned and faced her.

"You, too, Georgie," she said to me.

I joined Al.

Joan turned to Chuck. "Empty his gun," she said.

Chuck took my gun from his belt and broke out the cylinder and dumped the bullets into his palm. He shoved the bullets into his pocket and placed the unloaded gun on the desk.

Joan reached into her pocket and took out my leather holder and placed it next to the gun. "Wouldn't want to run off with a

cop's gun and badge," she said cheerfully. "Makes the cops awful mad when you do something like that."

She picked up the two envelopes and shoved them into the pocket of her jeans.

"Now both of you behave yourselves," she said, waving the gun at us. "Be good little boys and don't try to follow us when we leave. If either one of you pops your head out the door, I'll just have to shoot you—and I really wouldn't want to do something like that."

She motioned to Chuck, and the two of them backed away from us slowly. Chuck opened the rear door in back of Al's desk, and the pair ran out quickly, slamming the door behind them.

I ran to the desk and picked up my gun and reached in my pocket for the extra cartridges I always carry with me. As I loaded the gun, I heard a car start up in the parking lot in back, and then there was the squeal of tires as the car pulled away.

Al was already at the phone, dialing the operator.

I shoved my gun into its holster and grabbed my badge holder and hurried to the rear door.

I ran out into the parking lot just in time to see the tail lights of their car disappearing down the back road.

I yanked open the door of my car, which was parked near the

edge of the lot. Moments later, I was speeding down the road after them. Their tail lights were a good distance ahead of me, and then suddenly the lights disappeared. I knew they had turned off the road.

I kept on driving until I came to a dirt side road, and I swung the car into it. My headlights picked out their car parked about fifty feet in on the dirt road. I braked to a stop in back of their car and got out.

I walked over to the car. Chuck was sitting behind the wheel, and Joan was next to him. She rolled down the window as I came up and held out one of the white envelopes. I took the envelope and put it in my jacket pocket.

"How'd we do?" Joan asked excitedly.

"Fine," I said. "For a first job, you did real well. From now on, I'll let you handle all the jobs on your own."

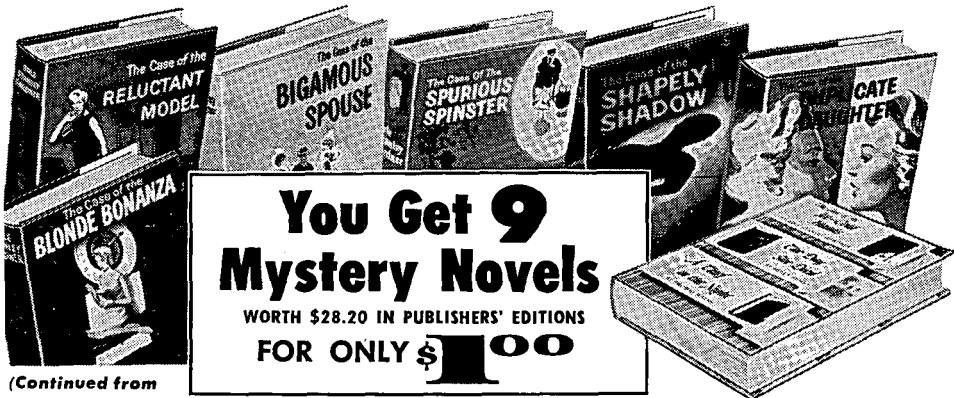
Both of them grinned at me happily.

"Get out of here and lay low for a while," I said. "I'll let you know when it's safe to hit another spot."

"Sure, Georgie," Joan said.

I straightened up and looked at her reproachfully. "The name is George," I said. "Don't you kids have any respect for the law?"

Both of them laughed hysterically. I patted the envelope in my pocket and laughed all the way back to my car.



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